


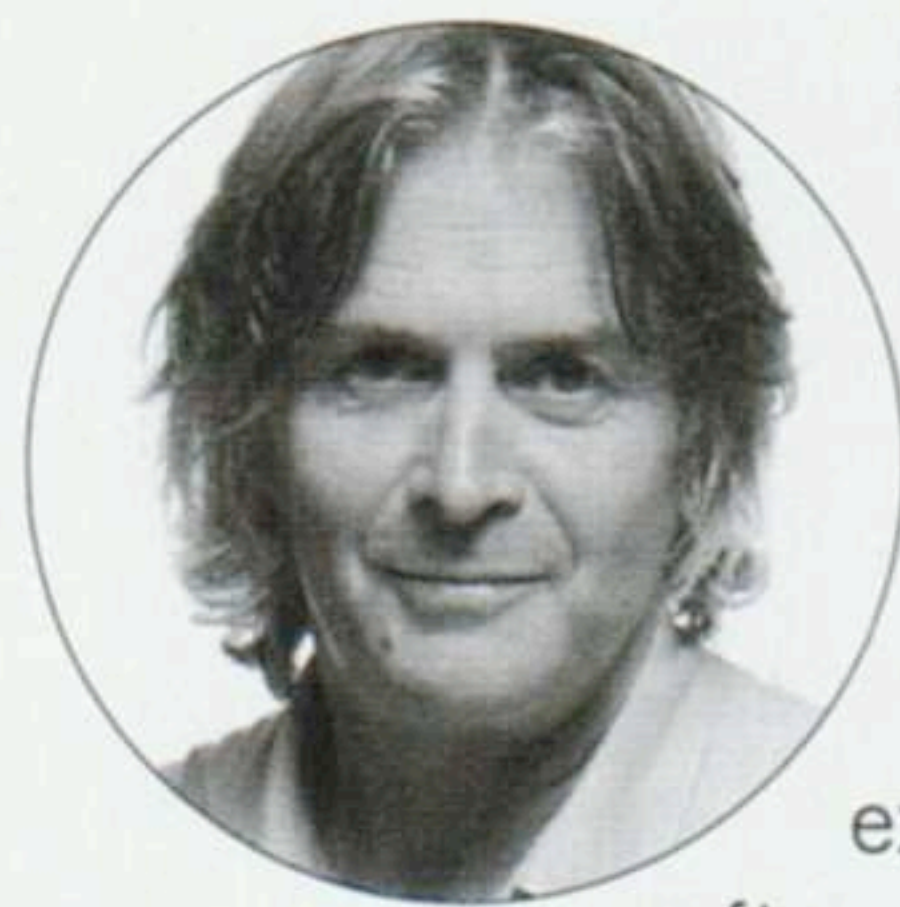
WINE COLUMN



ROBERT SANDALL

PULL THE OTHER ONE...

Most oenophile accessories make a simple pleasure confusing. But, says Robert Sandall, there are a few tools worth the trouble

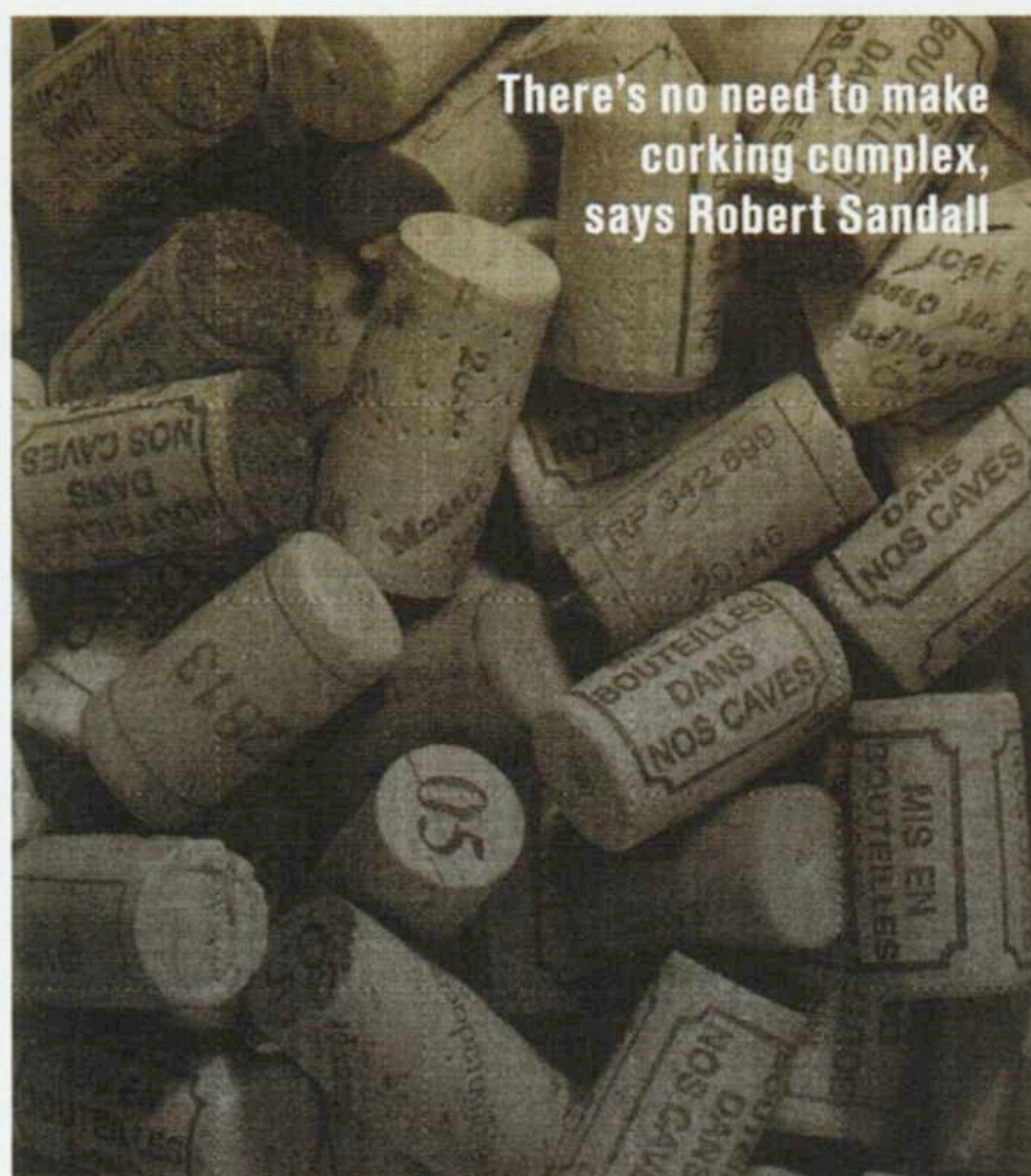


The only tools a dedicated quaffer really needs are a corkscrew and a receptacle that doesn't leak. But in reality, there is a range of stuff claiming to enhance the experience of all that ensues after you reach for a bottle.

Much is visually unappealing and functionally dubious, or both. My favourite nonsense gadget is the Angelshare Single Bottle Cellar, an overdesigned, tubular thing guaranteeing optimal humidity, temperature, no ultraviolet, no vibrations. The solitary confinement of this arrangement screams "autistic wine nerd".

So, for starters, back to basics. Do equip yourself with a foil cutter: nothing spoils the look of a bottle more than torn foil. In wine terms, it's the equivalent of a badly knotted tie. Next, cork extraction. It is difficult to find an unembarrassing corkscrew. The "waiter's friend" – the little fold-up, pen knife-like number used by most sommeliers – is notoriously unfriendly to those outside the trade. I've lost count of the number of times the awkward lever action has resulted in a broken cork or a chipped bottle rim.

Legend has it, it was his wife's problems with a "friend" which led the Texan, Herbert Allen, to design his Screwpull in 1979. This effective device, with its long, rabbit-ear clamps and



There's no need to make corking complex, says Robert Sandall

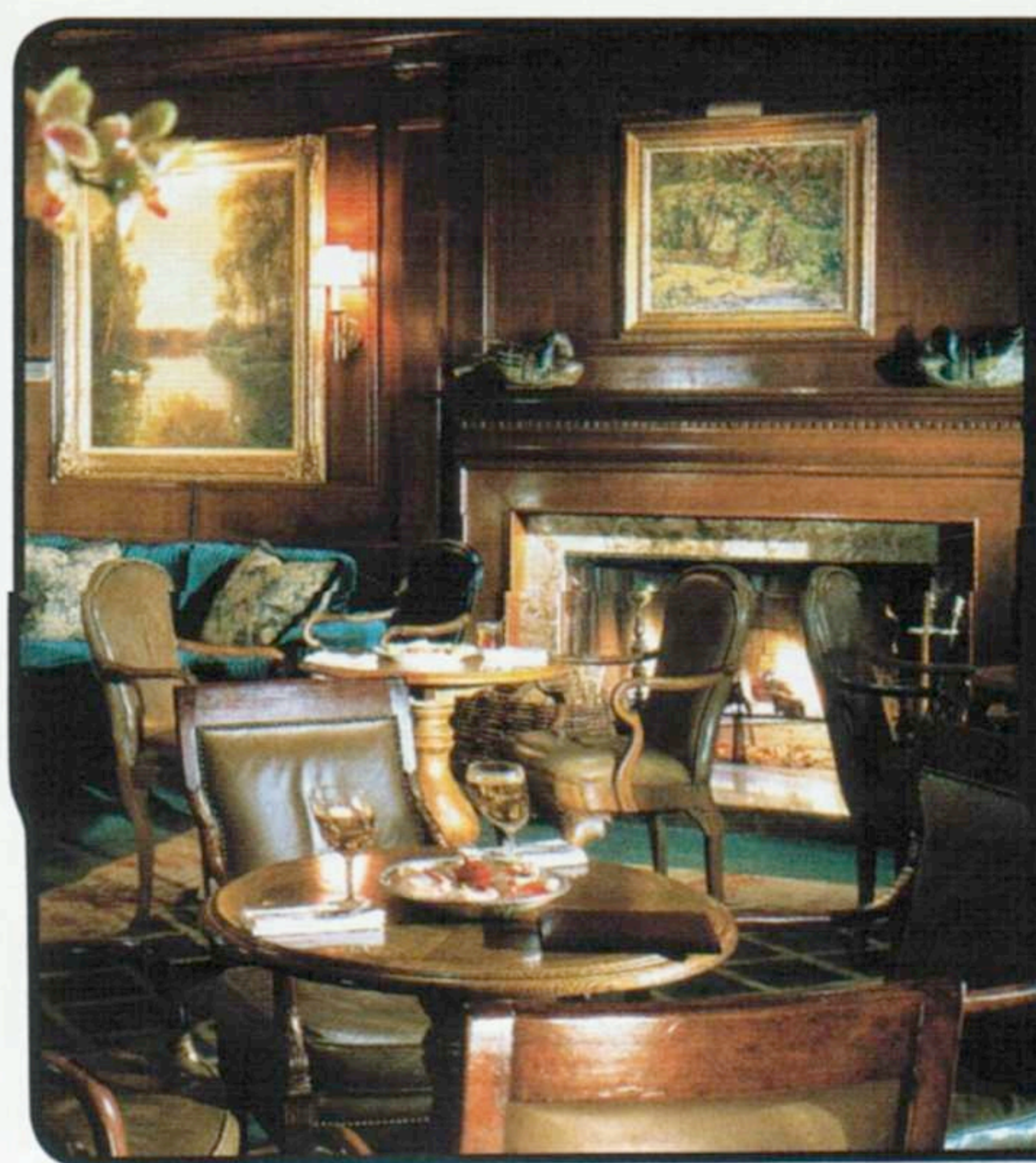
failsafe cork extraction, is too bulky for my taste and betrays too much anxiety about the job in hand. Leifheit, via Porsche design, manufactures a slim, sleek version – barely larger than a "friend" and without a trace of rabbit – which won't make you look like a Texan hostess on the verge of a breakdown (£49.95. 0049 2604 977 220, www.leifheit.de). And while we're with the ladies, don't buy a battery-operated corkscrew which does it all at the press of a button: way too Stepford. Real men pull corks.

Because most of us can't remember or be bothered to decant reds, product developers offer aeration plugs which you insert in the top of your bottle. The idea is the wine airs as you pour. Allegedly. None of these nasty prostheses I've tried has softened or strengthened anything. The gurgling noise they induce won't help your image as a wine buff either.

Beware also of thermometers which purport to judge the correct temperature to serve your gear. Rather like the Screwpull, these gadgets with their lights, displays and metal inserts – too earnest and geeky. If you must go down that route, choose non-contact, hand-held infrared by BonJour which read the temperature of your bottle without needing to sit in, or on it. More discreet and a tiny bit James Bond. (£20. 01 8002 2665 687, www.bonjourproducts.com)

Everybody will need to re-seal a bottle and there are plenty of vacuum-creating cork substitutes. The Pek Preservo Wine Steward is an enveloping steel canister which uses air cartridges to maintain your wine in unoxidised condition (£45. 01256 889010, www.peksystems.com). Then again, this piece of kit does have a Screwpull, over-anxious aspect which doesn't equate with vinous sophistication.

Unlike the one accessory that has embraced technology and come up with a system of ancillary care which sidesteps baroque gadgetry and bottle worries. It's a knowledge-based, guy thing, and sits in a box no bigger than your TV remote. This is – and we'll have to forgive it its unattractive name – the IntelliScanner Wine Collector. It reads the barcode on a bottle and can identify everything about it, from country of origin to grape variety. This information is downloaded onto your computer where IntelliScanner software rummages the internet for more info on when to drink it, how to get more of it, critical ratings and so on. The IntelliScanner has won awards in America and been fêted by the *New York Times* for its 21st-century twist on wine collecting. Best of all, from a gifting angle, it comes in an old-school wooden crate (£168. 001 800 555 5470, www.intelliscanner.com). **GG**



LA CONFIDENTIAL

In a town that abhors protocol (you can even ignore red lights if turning right) there's one place where rules still apply. The Bar (left) at the Hotel Bel-Air asks men to wear a jacket – a small concession to make for one of the west coast's most intimate, and intimidating, bars. Here real players, guests and Bel-Air residents toast success with dirty Martinis amid wood panelling, open fires and the tinkling of the baby grand. BP Rooms from £220. Hotel Bel-Air, 701 Stone Canyon Road, Los Angeles. 001 3800 648 4097, www.hotelbelair.com