

Eggy flavours in screwcapped wines are almost as big an issue as cork taint, IWC analysis reveals

Cork may yet redeem itself

Maggie Rosen and
Graham Holter

Cork taint looks like it could be in decline – but the scale of the problems affecting wines sealed with screwcaps have probably been underestimated, according to data released following this year's International Wine Challenge.

Faults caused by screwcaps are almost as common as cork taint, tasters found.

Of the total number of recorded tastes of wine during this year's IWC judging, 2.2 per cent showed high sulphide faults related to screwcaps – creating vegetal and eggy flavours – compared with 2.8 per cent for taint related to cork.

Sam Harrop MW, the IWC chairman who compiled the fault data, said: "It's quite alarming to find that some of the other faults that have been around in the past are almost as bad as cork taint. While we've been raving about cork taint, all these other issues have been ignored.

"The cork industry has taken a lot of abuse over the years for poor quality corks. I'm not suggesting that cork taint rates of 5, 6 or 7 per cent have been incorrect – but in this year's tasting we've established that it's much lower than many might think. There is the possibility that, in the past, cork taint has been over-inflated. Or perhaps all the hard work that the cork companies have done over the years is starting to filter into the system."

Speaking at OLN's International Wine Conference, Harrop said countries which

Faults detected by tasters at the IWC

Of all faults related to closures:

- cork taint 27.8%
- oxidation 16.6%
- sulphides/mercaptans 4.9%

Of all chemical faults:

- sulphides 24.3%
- oxidation 7.7%
- SO2 (rotten eggs) 1.7%
- pinking (a pink tinge) 0.2%

Of all microbial faults:

- Brettanomyces 10.6%
- rot 5.8%
- other 0.42%

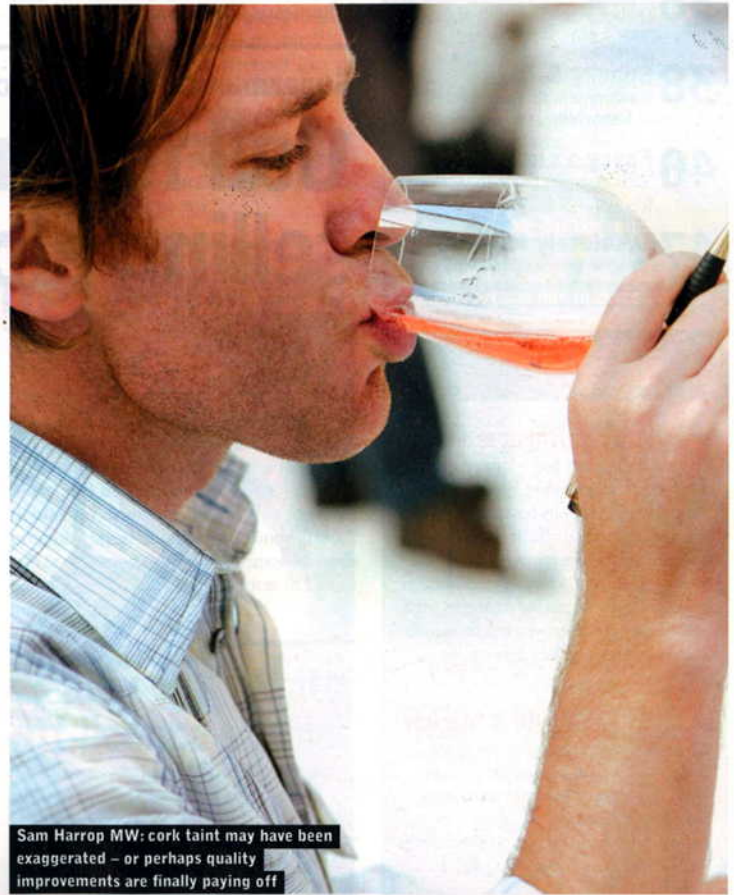
have been using screwcaps longer, such as New Zealand, have much lower failure rates. "There's still a lot of work to do to change winemaking techniques to suit this new type of closure," he said.

The figure for TCA taint is well down on the received industry wisdom on the number of corked wines, which falls somewhere between 5 and 10 per cent.

The IWC judges found oxidation faults related to cork in 1.6 per cent of tasted wines, bringing the proportion of wines affected by any cork-attributable fault to 4.4 per cent.

It was the first time in the competition's history that faults had been classified in this way. Overall, the failure rate was a shade over 7 per cent.

● See *International Wine Conference coverage on pages three, four and eight.*



Sam Harrop MW: cork taint may have been exaggerated – or perhaps quality improvements are finally paying off

VOX SHOP

Has a customer ever returned a faulty bottle of wine closed by screwcap?

"No one has ever returned a screwcap bottle or complained about it being off. People recognise cork taint but you don't get that with screwcaps. I think screwcaps are a great idea with young whites but they shouldn't be used on anything decent."

Matt Moxon

Edward Parker Wines,
Fakenham, Norfolk

"We've never had one bought back and we don't hear any complaints about them. Screwcaps are very popular but whether they're good is another story. You can't beat cork at the end of the day but screwcaps benefit us because you don't get them returned. Cork taint isn't a big problem, around one in 80 comes back to us, which isn't a lot."

Andy Kalam

Pedmore Wines, Stourbridge,
West Midlands

"Faults in screwcaps aren't a common problem and neither is cork taint. Ninety per cent of our range is French, which traditionally favours cork, and very rarely does someone bring a bottle back due to a fault."

Teresa Thompson

Pallant Wines, Arundel

"Cork closures get more complaints than screwcap. Lots of good quality wines are closed by screwcap and we don't find people return them. It doesn't matter what my view is on screwcaps, customers like them so we stock them and we find that people are happy to buy both."

Tharushanan Logenethan

Tipples of Bromley, Bromley

"We get very few wines returned full stop. The consensus seems to be that screwcap wine is perceived to be as good quality as wine closed with cork."

Mark Johnson

Celebrations Off-licence, Stockport

"Faults with cork have never been much of a problem and cork closures are getting better. Returns of tainted wine are very rare. It may a bit early to judge the screwcap closure at all."

Eileen Gordon,

Frazier's Wine Merchants, Tiddington,
Stratford-Upon-Avon