

SEAL OF APPROVAL

There's nothing more dispiriting than opening a corked wine. So why is cork still the closure of choice for wine drinkers, asks **SALLY EASTON MW**

Despite the strides made by screwcaps in the last decade, market research shows that most wine drinkers still favour bottles sealed with natural cork. Real cork apparently projects a positive image for the wine's overall appeal, of which the closure is seen as an important part. To reinforce this popular opinion, cork producers are finally taking the issue of cork-taint seriously. Over the past few years, they have invested millions in research and development, and are successfully reducing the incidence of tainted wine. Taken together, do these factors suggest a resurgence for cork, or just a very effective publicity campaign?

On the consumer front, market research company Wine Intelligence reports that 95% of all consumers still like, or are at least neutral about, buying wine with cork closures. (Results for synthetic stoppers and screwcaps are 85% and 70%, respectively.) Moreover, 55% of us actively prefer buying wine with cork closures. After natural cork, the preference for screwcaps has just exceeded that for synthetics – 24% versus 22%. Independent of particular preferences, most consumers still believe natural cork is the best closure for keeping wine in top form.

Decanter decided to conduct its own polls to gauge current popular opinion: one with the wine cognoscenti of the Winchester Wine Appreciation Society (WWAS) and another on the high street.

Our high street 'vox pop' eliminated non-wine drinkers from the survey but, even so, knowledge about wine and about closures varied widely. Even so, 90% of respondents said they knew what 'corked' wine meant.

The same number (90%) said that cork projected the best image about a bottle of wine: 'It's more likely to be a nice bottle if it has a cork in it,' was a typical response. Despite this impression, only 50% of respondents expressed a clear preference for cork. As for negative impressions from a closure, respondents were split between screwcaps and plastic, with one claiming, 'it's easy to give yourself a hernia trying to pull out a plastic cork.'

When asked about a proposed 'quality mark', indicating a minimum standard for cork, 50% said they might be encouraged to buy a wine bearing this reassurance. Around 60% said they would find it useful to know the type of closure before purchase, via some

information on the back label.

As one might expect, the survey of the wine society members showed a deeper understanding of different closure types and associated quality issues. Approximately 25% of WWAS respondents said they would like to know the type of closure before they bought a bottle. Around a third said they would deliberately buy a wine because of a particular closure, with all but one qualifying this answer. Philip Evins from Winchester said he would buy 'screwcap for fresh young wines such as Sauvignon Blanc, and best-quality cork on bottles for ageing.' Another member said: 'Cork is still the best option, especially now that the standard of cork closures is improving.'

Regarding image, more than 40% of WWAS respondents said the type of closure was not overly important to the image of the wine. However, three quarters of respondents said that natural cork projected the best image, while two thirds said synthetics gave the worst image. These numbers differ from our high street survey, so do closures lose importance as wine knowledge increases?

Either way, it's clear that more work is required to restore confidence in natural cork among consumers wearied by too many faulty bottles. WWAS member Mark Biden summed this up: 'Losing a nice bottle of wine because of a faulty cork is a pain. It's not just the cost, but the depressing effect it has on the occasion. What should have been the delightful moment suddenly becomes a test of nerves.'

The cork industry is listening, and has come up with several new strategies to combat TCA. One of them is both simple and obvious: a major source of TCA has been identified as the band of cork bark around the base of the tree, where mould can migrate from the forest undergrowth. Today, producers no longer use this section for the production of wine closures.

In addition, since chlorine was implicated in the creation of TCA, it is no longer used as a cleaning agent in cork production. Once cork bark has been harvested, it obviously has to be thoroughly cleaned. With chlorine out of the picture, several types of new proprietary cleaning processes are being used – and these also remove the vast majority of any TCA present.

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Additionally, more 'technical' corks are being produced for many everyday wines. These stoppers include finely ground particles of deep-cleansed cork that are stuck together, with or without natural cork discs at either end. It is these technical corks that are at the cutting edge of cork R&D.

There is still more to be done, but by corroborating the results of various R&D projects with independent, third party laboratories, the cork industry is taking significant steps forward. And in the meantime, it seems many consumers are happy to carry on choosing cork – even if it means enduring the occasional test of nerves. **D**

PHOTOGRAPH: JOE PARTRIDGE/CEPHAS

THE FACTS

Total closures: 19.68 billion

Natural corks: 13.11 billion

Technical corks: 2.85 billion

Synthetic corks: 2.48 billion

Screwcaps: 1.24 billion

New Zealand has the highest use of screwcaps, with 72% of bottles closed this way. In France, the figure is 3,5%.

A wine trade survey of 1,000 professionals across 55 countries points to reduced use of natural cork and more screwcaps in the future. Eighty percent of respondents feel that natural cork is in decline and 95% feel that screwcap use will continue to grow.

The same survey reports that the wine trade believes consumers' top three pressing concerns from bottle closures are: easy to open, a proper seal and freedom from cork taint.

SOURCE: SKALLI & REIN GLOBAL WINE CLOSURE REPORT 2006

