

## Cork News

Synthetic stoppers seem to be stealing market share from natural cork, certainly in the UK. The usual explanation is to avoid cork taint, but Andre Chapman (of A E Chapman and Sons, UK agent for Integra) doesn't see it just like that. He is supplying around 18 million Integra units to the UK bottling trade this year and estimates that between a quarter and a third of UK-filled bottles will be closed with synthetics. Chapman sees the main role of synthetics as making up for the shortfall in natural cork, with annual wine production at 15 billion bottles, but only 13 billion corks.

One criticism levelled at synthetics is the difficulty in reinsertion. Chapman claims that Integra has overcome this, because once drawn, it remains compressed for several hours allowing reinsertion, whereas other brands may expand immediately. Waverley Vintners has a major on-trade business using Integra and this appears to be a key reason. Another concern is the ability of synthetics to cope with a range of bottle necks. Most European glass manufacturers use the "cette standard" (18.5 mm bore). However, in Italy, there are many smaller glass producers using anything from 17.5 to 19.5mm (with generous tolerances), which make synthetics unsuitable. In South Africa, 17.5 mm is standard and a version of Integra has been developed for this market. Patrick McGrath (MD of Hatch Mansfield) is a big fan of synthetics and uses Supremecorq in several of his agencies but reports customer complaints about extraction problems - which may be due to the 17.5mm neck bore used in South America. His Chilean agency, Errazuriz, is currently carrying out wide ranging tests on synthetics.

Another concern for synthetics is the unproven long-term storage issue. Preliminary findings have been announced by the Australian Wine Research Institute, where 14 different closures are being studied over 3 years. The project is tracing levels of aromatics, as well as free and total SO<sub>2</sub> in a Semillon wine. At 6 and 12 months, results favour a screw-top, while two closures (unspecified) have been rated lower in fruit attributes and higher in oxidation characters.

So can cork fight back? The wine industry has been taken for granted by cork producers for too long according to Chapman and he is surprised it took so much time to address issues like radiation and microwaves for cleaning corks. It seems surprising that research into the true extent and source of wine taint has only just been set up. Paul Hankin (Wine Technologist, Asda) agrees "the picture is very confused" and feels there have been occasions when cork has been blamed unfairly for bad wine. A UK-wide project, coordinated by the Wine and Spirit Association, has just been launched to quantify and analyse wine taint. It is supported by major retailers, suppliers and producers, along with Campden and Chorleywood Food Research Association and preliminary findings will be presented in May.

Chapman feels that cork has not had its day "It's a marvellous product - you can't beat pulling a cork." He believes it's more environmentally friendly - synthetic closures are oil-based and non-renewable. He also sees the market for synthetic closures growing with demand for bottled wine, as even with new cork forests, it will take the cork industry a very long time to respond.

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