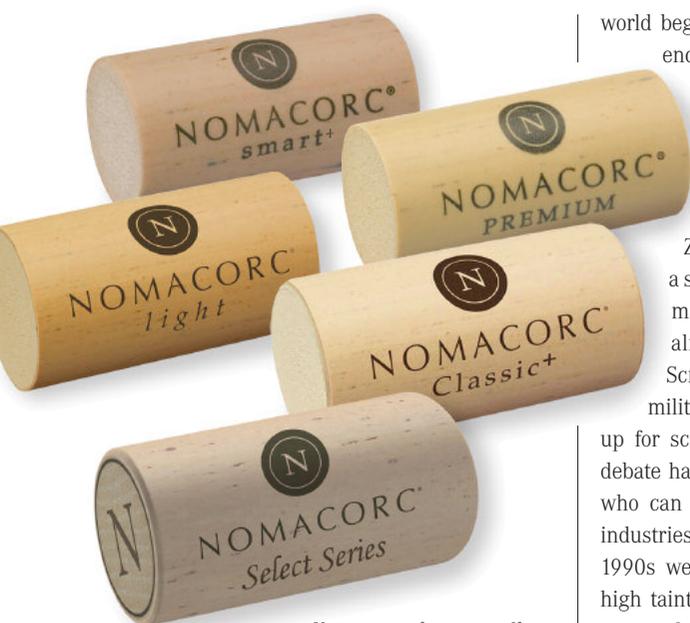


THE CLOSURES DEBATE REOPENED

It wasn't so long ago that the world wine industry was in the midst of a furious debate about cork versus alternative closures, resulting in declining sales for cork producers. Not only has the closures debate failed to go away, says Dr Jamie Goode, but some wine producers are now abandoning screwcaps and returning to cork.



Nomacorc is expanding its share of the closure market.

For quite a while there hasn't been much to be said about the often controversial topic of wine bottle closures. The debate really began in the mid-to-late 1990s when grumblings about cork taint became progressively louder, and alternatives to cork first became widely accepted. Then, in the first decade of this century, it became the hot topic in the wine business. While the arguments about the prevalence of cork taint continued to rage (3%? 5%? 10%), the first data from closure trials began to emerge. The cork industry finally appeared to be taking some proper quality control steps, and wine scientists began to discuss the level of oxygen transmission by different closure types, and how this might impact wine quality.

The debate becomes heated

Alternative closures continued to gain ground, and – rather interestingly – the wine

world began to segment according to preference for closures. Australia and New Zealand have switched almost exclusively to screwcaps in the space of a decade. It's hard to give exact figures, but around 80% of Australian and 95% of New Zealand wine bottles are sealed with a screwcap. There, the support of winemakers towards screwcap as closure is almost religious in its fervour. Screwcap supporters have shown a militant evangelism in terms of sticking up for screwcap and bashing cork, and the debate has been quite heated. In some ways, who can blame them? The corks that their industries were being supplied with in the late 1990s were seemingly of poor quality, with high taint rates and variable performance in terms of oxygen transmission. Some producers in Australia and New Zealand still use natural cork, but mainly for high-end red wines.

In Europe, the attitude is quite different. At the time of writing, the 2010 Bordeaux *en primeur* campaign is underway, following a hugely successful 2009 campaign where many millions of pounds were invested in the top bottles – all of which were sealed with natural cork. This contrasts with the Australian/New Zealand position that would suggest that wine is spoiled the moment it is sealed with cork. In the classic French regions of Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne, there appears to be little call for alternatives to cork. The fact that investors and collectors are paying record prices for Bordeaux suggests that there is no perceived problem in the marketplace with the performance of natural cork over the expected lifetime of these bottles, or it suggests that there is no real faith in the abilities of the current crop of alternative closures for fine wines such as these.

Aside from the very top wines, screwcaps

have made much more modest gains in market share in Europe and the USA than they have in Australia and New Zealand. This is because of a degree of market resistance to screwcaps, because of the perceived cheapness of wines sealed with this closure. In these markets, the alternative closure of choice is the synthetic cork, and by far the dominant player in this market is Nomacorc, since the demise of its largest competitor Supreme Corq earlier this year. The exception in Europe is the UK market. In the UK, screwcaps are widely accepted. In part, this is because of the excellent performance of Australian and New Zealand wine in the UK, and these are largely screwcapped sealed. But a major contribution here has been through the multiple grocers, whose buyers have favoured screwcaps as the closure of choice, and to a degree have driven acceptance of this closure type by UK consumers. But in the last few months, the topic of wine bottle closures has become interesting again. Two recent stories have made the headlines in the wine trade press, and this looks like reignited interest in the closure debate.

Two switches

The first is the well-publicised decision by South African producer Klein Constantia to switch back to cork from screwcap for one of their top wines. The second is a decision by major Portuguese producer Sogrape to begin using screwcap for some of its wines. Both stories bring to light an increasing trend for producers to consider more carefully their closure choices, taking into account implications both for wine quality and also marketing.

Klein Constantia winemaker Adam Mason generated major news coverage for his decision to return to cork for his top Sauvignon Blanc, the Perdeblokke. Klein Constantia first moved to screwcap for some of its wines in 2003, and the Perdeblokke Sauvignon was bot-



“The best thing that happened to the cork industry was the screwcap.”

Adam Mason,
winemaker,
Klein Constantia

tled under screwcap from 2006–2009. However, the 2010 vintage, when it is released, will be back in cork. The decision was prompted by the fact that Mason didn’t like the way the wine developed under screwcap. “The Pederblokke was screwcapped but I always got a slight whiff of sulfide on opening it,” explained Mason.

Some context is needed here. The way a wine develops after bottling depends on the composition of the wine, the bottling conditions (key among these being the amount of oxygen pick-up during bottling and the amount of oxygen in the headspace – both factors together being referred to as Total Pack Oxygen [TPO]), and the closure oxygen transmission. Closure oxygen transmission is quite complicated, involving both oxygen entering from outside the bottle and also oxygen that might be dissolved in the closure that is then released in the weeks and months following bottling. Different closures have different levels of oxygen transmission, and so it follows that wines will develop differently after bottling – and taste different – depending on the closure. The lowest level of oxygen transmission is achieved by using a screwcap with a tin layer in the liner. In Australia and New Zealand, almost all screwcaps have this liner, often referred to as tin/saran. There is a second screwcap liner, Saranex, which has a white appearance as opposed to the metallic look of the tin/saran liner. Saranex allows more oxygen transmission than tin/saran: not all screwcaps are the same.

The ultra-low oxygen transmission of the tin/saran-lined screwcap has been implicated in the generation – post bottling – of certain volatile sulfur compounds. This phenomenon, referred to as ‘reduction’, is still far from being fully understood by wine scientists, but there is no doubt that in some cases, screwcapped wines can have a whiff of struck match/flint/rubber character, and some hardness on the palate. In the absence of good data, no one knows for sure just how widespread this phenomenon is.

Cork production

Country	Forest Area Hectares	% of World's Forest Area	Production Tons (000)	% of Total Production
Portugal	736.000	33%	185	54%
Spain	500.000	22%	88	26%
Algeria	410.000	18%	20	6%
Morocco	340.000	15%	15	4%
France	100.000	4%	5	1%
Tunisia	99.000	4%	9	3%
Italy	90.000	4%	18	5%
TOTAL	2.275.000	100%	340	100%

SOURCE: 2004 APORCE FIGURES, VIA CORKO.COM

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Mason says that his choice to make this switch was seen by many screwcap advocates as an admission of his own incompetence. These advocates argue that there is nothing wrong with screwcaps: they just require a different approach to winemaking – and that giving up on screwcaps shows that Mason has failed to master this. But Mason sees things a different way. “Rather than compromise the winemaking,” he explained, “I decided to go back to cork. I didn’t want to let the tail wag the dog. Why change your winemaking style to match the closure?” He adds that by bottling under screwcap, “we lowered the quality of the wine”. But he’s not anti-screwcap, and recognizes the importance of the emergence of alternatives to cork for helping the cork industry address issues of taint and inconsistency. “The best thing that happened to the cork industry was the screwcap,” he says. To put this in perspective, Mason still uses screwcap for the 100,000 bottles of regular Klein Constantia Sauvignon Blanc; the shift is solely for the 3,000 bottles of Perdeblokke.

Another gifted young South African winemaker, Duncan Savage of Cape Point, is also making a similar switch. “We went to screwcap for the first time in 2010,” he says. “We’re going to change back to cork.”

A change to screwcap

Considerable publicity was also generated by the decision of Sogrape, Portugal’s largest family-owned wine company, to shift its Quinta de Azevedo Vinho Verde to screwcap from May 2011. This story was seen as newsworthy because Portugal is the world’s largest cork-producing country, and the use of screwcaps by a Portuguese company is seen by some as unpatriotic. However, the news reports mostly ignore two important details.

“By changing Quinta de Azevedo’s closure from cork to screwcap, Sogrape Vinhos is responding to the request that the UK and other markets have been making,” explained Sogrape’s marketing director Rita Vilas-Boas. So it is a change in response to market demands, chiefly in the UK, where the wine retails in some major retailers (Waitrose, Majestic and The Wine Society) at a price of £6.99 (\$11.30).

“Without having a proactive position regarding closures, Sogrape Vinhos is committed to better serve the preferences of our consumers,” says Vilas-Boas. “In this particular case, screwcap will not only help maintain the fresh, lively and elegant style of Quinta de

Azevedo, but also represent great convenience for consumers to open and reseal the bottle.” For the Portuguese market the wine will remain under natural cork.

The second important detail that Vilas-Boas revealed is that the screwcap used will have a Saranex liner, which seems a sensible choice because it avoids any risk of reduction issues. While Australian screwcap use is almost exclusively based around the tin/saran liner, one significant producer there is using the Saranex liner also. Alan Kennett, chief winemaker at Casella Wines (who make mega-brand YellowTail), has opted for screwcaps with the Saranex liner because in trials, he preferred how the wine showed under this closure.

Other alternatives

Synthetic corks seem to be doing well in some markets and poorly in others. In Australia and New Zealand, they have very little penetration. In the European wine-producing countries, they are widely used for whites and rosés, but less so for reds. This is slightly frustrating for producers of synthetic corks because, with their higher oxygen transmission rates, they are probably even better suited to red wines. The USA is a good market for synthetics, where they are the main alternative to cork in a country that still sees screwcaps as

downmarket in terms of image. The recent demise of one of the major players in the synthetic market, Supreme Corq, could be taken as a sign that the synthetic cork market is struggling. But this is not how Malcolm Thompson, Nomacorc’s vice president of marketing and innovation sees it. “The wine closure industry has seen a lot of consolidation,” says Thompson. “All categories of products – including natural cork, screwcaps and synthetics – are experiencing this. Weaker players are dropping out due to their inability to compete and sustain acceptable profitability. In the case of Supreme Corq, its technology (injection moulding) was inferior in performance and economic competitiveness. Nomacorc’s business remains extremely strong and we continue to see double-digit growth rates.”

Another closure manufacturer experiencing growth is Oeneo, who make the Diam closure. Boasting taint-free status by virtue of being made from granules of cork that are recombined after being cleaned from any taint, Diam is available in a number of formulations, each with a different level of oxygen transmission. Both Nomacorc and Oeneo have adopted a marketing policy on being able to offer winemakers taint-free closures with a choice of oxygen transmission levels. The idea is to encourage winemakers to choose a closure with an oxygen transmission rate that suits the wine style. Thus Nomacorc’s new ‘Select’ series of closures, which uniquely for synthetic corks allow end-printing, will eventually encompass a range of oxygen transmission levels, presumably with research-informed guidance.

As winemakers become more aware of the potential influence of different closure types on wine flavour, I suspect we will begin to see closures as just another winemaking tool, rather than a choice of just one type for all wine styles. My prediction is that we’ll see quite a few producers in Australia and New Zealand make the migration from tin/saran-lined screwcaps back to natural cork, or alternatives such as Diam, for some of the wines in their range – especially seeing as the growing Chinese market seems to favour cork strongly over screwcaps. But these will be better quality corks than they moved away from some years ago. And we’ll see just as many, if not more, in Old World countries make the switch the other way for some wines in their range as they decide that, for reasons of consumer convenience and wine flavour, screwcap is the better closure. ■

Screwcap milestones

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|--------------|---|
| 1959 | Le Bouchon Mécanique created a screwcap for bottles. Adoption was limited. |
| 1980s | Screwcaps widely used in Switzerland, with 60m bottles under screwcap. Research undertaken into screwcaps at the Australian Wine Research Institute. |
| 2000 | Winemakers in the Clare Valley, Australia, adopt the screwcap. Jeffrey Grosset uses Stelvin closures and a specially designed bottle from Saverglass. |
| 2001 | Winemakers discuss screwcaps as an alternative to cork. New Zealand Screwcap Initiative formed. Kim Crawford releases first wine under screwcap. Other producers soon followed. |
| 2004 | The creation of the International Screwcap Initiative. |

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