

CLOSURES DEBATE

BREATHING SPACE

The closures debate looks set to run and run, but now the goalposts have shifted from TCA to oxidation, says Penny Boothman

NATIONAL pride. Important in wars, tourism, football...and the closures debate, apparently. The discussion has been raging for years, but natural cork has recently hit the headlines again with the news that Apcor is in discussion with Chelsea football club manager José Mourinho to be the face of its next promotional campaign. Not because he has anything at all to do with the wine industry, but simply because he's Portuguese. And there's nothing like a link with a popular sporting figure to garner favour with the drinking public.

The details of the new Mourinho campaign have yet to be revealed, but can a man who recently sold his "lucky" coat for £5,000 at a charity auction really reverse the flagging fortunes of the Portuguese cork industry? It might sound unlikely, but it would be unwise for competitors in the closures market to underestimate the power of having such a people's hero on-side. In fact, for a debate that has previously been aimed almost exclusively at winemakers, the consumer now seems to be pretty firmly in the frame. And it's not just cork; earlier this year the launch of an International Screwcap Initiative was announced, an extension of the successful New Zealand Screwcap Initiative, as a way to bring the benefits of this closure to the attention of the consumer as well.

Unsurprisingly, research abounds. "The

three or four consumer surveys that we have done clearly show a much higher degree of preference for cork than for alternative closures," says Antonio Amorim, president of Apcor. "We're talking about some studies showing that 80-90% of all consumers prefer a natural cork over a plastic one or an aluminium screwcap. So the consumer is certainly an ally of the cork industry," he adds.

Market analyst, Wine Intelligence, tracks UK consumer attitudes towards bottle closures in an ongoing survey. "Over the last two years, we have seen a big shift in attitude and, not surprisingly, it's gone from an outright rejection of screwcaps to a grudging acceptance of them," comments Richard Halstead, MD at Wine Intelligence. "Broadly speaking, consumers have been neutral towards synthetic stoppers. In other words, it's not going to affect their purchase. What's interesting is the extent to which natural cork still has a very, very big base of support among consumers, so all this talk in the trade about cork being a closure that is unreliable or whatever appears not to have translated into a consumer feeling against it."

Oxygen think-tank

The good news is that we've finally stopped squabbling about what TCA is, where it comes from and whose problem it is – and we've even stopped using protection from this fault as the main

reason to use a particular closure. This, along with reliability, consistency, cost and convenience has been the main front of the closures debate for some years now, but more recently the opposing sides of the closures industry have been sniping over the twin issues of oxidation and ageing ability. Recently published research from the University of Bordeaux has confirmed that natural cork does indeed allow a degree of oxygen ingress during bottle ageing. In fact, TCA complaints are at an all-time low among cork producers, with industry giant Amorim receiving just one complaint from sales of 820 million Twin Top stoppers in the last year.

"This study confirms that natural cork is still the best closure out there and gives evidence of the weak performance of some alternative closures," continues Amorim. "The question is to know how wine evolves in the bottle after bottling, and with cork this is a much more natural and gradual progression that allows the wine to improve. We're seeing in some New World and Old World

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markets people moving away from synthetics specifically because of oxidation problems and coming back to natural corks because they were deceived with the performance of these plastic closures. The market certainly looks positive for cork."

The fightback by the cork industry has until now been driven by research and development to come up with ways to make its product unerringly dependable, and indeed the work continues to improve all previous improvements. "Rosa Evolution, as the name explains, is basically an upgrade or an enhancement on the previous Rosa system," explains Carlos de Jesus, director of marketing at Amorim. "We've just changed it slightly so it's not as aggressive or invasive a treatment as it was originally. We're going to install the first industrial pilots within the next quarter." The main improvement is that Rosa Evolution can be used to treat whole natural corks, without costly repolishing issues.

What TCA?

"In our case TCA is a thing of the past, we've probably said this a couple of times before. We're not particularly that worried about TCA – that doesn't mean that we've lowered our guard, we'll never be able to do that again – but in terms of controlling it and having the risk management policy that every successful industry has, then yes, that is fully accomplished within Amorim," continues de Jesus. "The main question is 'Are we

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selling more corks than ever?' and the answer is that yes we are. I think consumers never really stopped trusting cork, or the sales curve would not be the way that it is."

So what about this question of slow oxygenation during ageing? There's surely a very fine line between beneficial oxygen ingress and premature oxidation, which also forms part of the whole

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reliability argument. "Some wine styles may benefit from more gas exchange than others, depending on grape variety, etc. The key is consistent gas exchange from one individual closure to another within the same batch," comments Dean Banister, commercial manager at Oeneo Closures Division. "Both Diam and screwcap offer this consistency. Both also offer differing permeability options for the winemaker to choose from to allow him or her to decide how they wish the wine to develop, with very little gas exchange or with slightly more."

Synthetic closure pioneer Supreme Corq has also just announced a brand new closure with an improved oxygen barrier. "The major innovation that we are delighted to announce this month is the launch of Supreme Corq X2," explains Simon Waller, VP global sales at Supreme Corq LLC. "This is a newly engineered version of our Original closure that offers twice the oxygen barrier properties of our original product while retaining all of the branding and ease-of-use features that Supreme Corq is known for. Supreme Corq X2 is the best barrier to oxygen ingress of any synthetic on the market today and for a modest premium offers considerably extended shelf life and wine freshness."

A breath of fresh air

However, just as some synthetics manufacturers are working at keeping oxygen out, others are more intent on letting just a little bit in. "It seems a lot of people initially jumped on the screwcap bandwagon believing a hermetic, impermeable seal was the way to go, but many are now finding that their wines could indeed use 'some' air exchange so even screwcap manufacturers are now experimenting with different cap liners which will allow some oxygen ingress," says Mark Coleman, global business director at Neocork. "Our most recent innovation, however, is our COP technology, or Controlled Oxygen

Permeation, whereby we can dictate the amount of oxygen exchange between cork and wine based on the type and density of materials we use. Demand has increased dramatically, we are still working hard to keep up."

Synthetic closures have been on the market for well over a decade now, and the number of manufacturers and products available has multiplied considerably, but a little consolidation is only to be expected in such a competitive market. "The market has changed as a consequence of both consumers and retailers expecting improved standards of performance at reduced prices," comments Anyvonne Deguy, sales manager at Integra Europe. "This had led to a requirement for confirmation that the wine will not be tainted – even beyond the expected time taken to move through the distribution system. The market has become more fractured and complex with many new suppliers offering synthetic closures at very different price and quality points. We expect to see consolidation of the amount of synthetic suppliers as quality standards and customer expectation lift."

Aggressive R&D

Nomacorc is another synthetics brand that has been vocal in the debate about wine ageing capacity. Suzanne Alardin, communications and PR manager, Nomacorc, says, "In terms of closure specifications and performances, wine needs will become more and more specific and closures will be able to answer only through aggressive R&D. R&D is a clear advantage for synthetics versus natural, technical and screwcap. On one hand, natural corks have a wide natural variability in terms of quality and oxygen transfer rate that R&D can hardly improve. On the other hand, technical and screwcap have very few possibilities in working on specifications such as permeability."

Indeed, this confirmation of oxygen ingress during bottle ageing puts screwcaps – which have made their trade on the basis of being the ultimate oxygen barrier – in an interesting position. However, when it comes to young-drinking, high-volume wines, a screwcap is still very often the best answer. The Australian glass market sold 1.1 billion bottles last year, of which 320-350 million were screwcap-ready.

“We’ve got so much momentum going now with screwcap, the only area where there’s still active debate is with the premium reds, just because they don’t have the across-the-board depth of experience to know what the outcomes will be with screwcaps on those wines,” explains Tony Royal, MD of Portavin South Australia which operates an Australia-wide contract bottling operation. “When we first started going over to screwcap, which was only a matter of three or four years ago, there were reductive characters and screwcap characters and all this sort of business. But since that initial settling in period it’s just swung across dramatically to screwcap.”

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We all know that Australia has embraced the screwcap, but what about other markets? “Growth, growth and even more growth!” says George Thomson, key account director of international packaging manufacturers, Crown UCP. “We are also seeing a trend towards ‘in-market’ bottling, closer to the point of consumption. What seemed like gazing into a crystal ball back in 2000 appears to be becoming clearer today – a move to EPE Saranex liners in the UK, embossed closures, the possible introduction of ‘torque on closures’ emulating the look of the traditional overcapsule.”

In-market bottling has the dual benefit of reducing shipping costs and reducing the length of time the wine spends in its final container before reaching the consumer. “Over the past couple of years the screwcap has gained an ever-stronger presence in the marketplace owing to supermarkets taking the lead. Currently, of the wine that is contract-filled into bottle in the UK, I would estimate that screwcaps are taking up around 30% of the volume,” says Sasha Erben, director at Erben Closures which supplies synthetic stoppers, corks and screwcap closures to bottlers in the UK market. “One positive aspect to come out of the now boring and dragged out closures debate is the concern, finally, for the quality of the closures, their primary purpose being that of protection and preservation for the contents.”

Support for screwcaps

Multiple grocers and other large retailers have indeed welcomed screwcaps into the UK market with open arms, and their enthusiasm has been echoed by the drinking public. As Anne Seznec of Guala Closures explains, “Public opinion seems to want screwcap for its convenience and, given the rise of single households here in the UK, people no

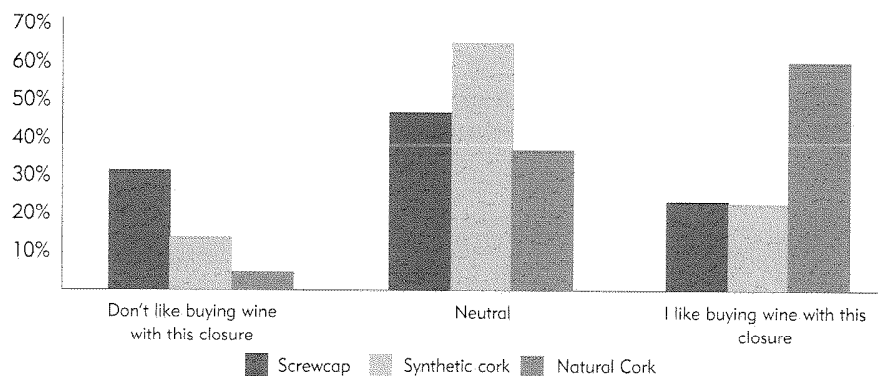
longer have to drink the full bottle as they can keep it longer." An interesting and valid point to make as the problem of binge drinking spends more and more time on the front pages.

But it's not just a benefit in the off-trade. "In the on-trade, there is also an increase in screwcaps," says Seznec. "This is useful to stop wine being open for days and having to pour it down the drain when it goes off."

If synthetics are ahead on innovation and screwcaps are the retailers' (and increasingly the producers') choice, even with the TCA issue buried, could this signal the end for cork? "The bottom line of all this is, is the debate being closed or is the debate just being opened?" asks Amorim's de Jesus. "For those in the cork industry I think it's still pretty much alive and kicking."

Same time next year, then? **db**

Attitudes towards different types of closure, November 2005



Source: Wine Intelligence Consumer Access

Attitudes towards different types of closure, November 2005

	Screwcap	Synthetic cork	Natural cork
Don't like buying wine with this closure	31%	14%	5%
Neutral	46%	64%	36%
I like buying wine with this closure	23%	22%	59%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Wine Intelligence Consumer Access

