

TRANSLATION FROM GERMAN

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Do your plastic cork stoppers smell like cow or horse stables? Then it could be a Nomacorc stopper. The company is taking measures to limit the damages, and is recalling products affected by Talc (Photo: ddw)

Problems with stoppers come up time and time again. If it is a question of TCA migration from natural cork stoppers, it is easy to spot the culprit. If the problem is of another origin, however, bottlers are often in difficulties. Currently one particular plastic stopper is at the heart of discussion. The diagnosis: it smells like a horse stable.

Stoppers: Between Euphoria and Disappointment

„It smells bad, but doesn't affect the wine“. These are the words written by Nomacorc to their customers, who had complained of the stable-like smell of the synthetic stopper. Contrary to some companies within the field of cork, who try to brush any problems that arise under the carpet, this company is dealing with the sharp rise in incidences with a view to damage limitation. “3% of our global yearly production, and with it 24 million stoppers could be affected,” estimates Michael Gesse, German Sales Manager for Nomacorc. While to begin with, the company could only stab in the dark, one thing now seems certain: it is due to talc. This is required for the production of polyethylenes, and is a core substance of extrusion (from the manufacturing process). According to company data, the supply in question comes from mines in Montana/USA, whereas it used to be taken from China.

Talc Crisis: Stable smells from US raw materials

As far as complaints go, Nomacorc holds up its hands: “We have made a mistake, and we admit that,” says Michael Gisse. In the event of complaints, the batch number is first checked to make sure that particular shipment could have been affected. Any client who could or can smell the fragrance upon removing the cork, was or is entitled to a replacement delivery. However, not all clients have complained, even when the product “smelt absolutely awful” on removing the cork, as one wine taster described the uncorking experience. According to our research, many have chosen to bottle their products with plastic stoppers, however, possibly believing in a sort of volatility, or maybe due to the fact that the bottling plant wanted a quick decision. With the example in question, however, the wine is still on sale, and even the marketer of the product says: “Remove the cork from the bottle, and you get an unpleasant, slightly musty smell, like a stable. Some of our clientele have noticed this, even if it doesn't necessarily lead people to believe that the wine is bad.” The existence of actual effects on sensory appreciation of the wine, shows the results of comparative internal bottling practices used for this wine, following appropriate experiences with natural cork stoppers (which is far from being considered as belonging to the past). The sensory verdict of these tests is “less fruitiness.”

Sensory effects?

„Significant to the senses“ was also the result of research on selected bottles from DLR Rheinpfalz. Testers used a triangle test which unanimously showed a poorer evaluation of wine bottled with Nomacorc. At the same time, scientists highlighted on the DDW questionnaire, that the differences would not have been noticed without a wine to compare with. Of course, the plastic stopper taken from the bottle smelt unpleasant. However, the wine itself, that was bottled with these stoppers, although not particularly bad or not enjoyable, was nevertheless much less fruity and had a comparatively unimpressive nose. The fact that the talc was deposited on the sides of stopper and not on top or underneath, in direct contact with the wine, may possibly be the cause of the problem, as was presumed. However, the test wine that was investigated had only been in the bottle for one month, and there were already significant sensory differences.

Direct Comparison: less fruity

One result that the Geisenheim Research Institute has not yet been able to confirm. Dr. Rainer Jung reports that after several investigations and comparative studies in the field of complaint processing: “We couldn’t find any significant differences with the wine, despite a strong smell from the stopper itself.” On this point, Dr. Jung himself is surprised that bottlers have used this stopper, and also wonders why the smell led no-one at the company – neither in the USA (where the talc situation arose) nor in Belgium – to consider stopping the product.

In order to avoid this happening in the future, Nomacorc has introduced a threefold control process. This should also remedy the problems with talc. Soon, a smell and taste free variety will be implemented, which is used with positive results in the automobile industry to stop the foaming of mounting boards, announces Michael Giese.

There are also still the reproach of the plasticizer, which may be allowing plastic materials into the wine (reports DDW) – a problem that the Geisenheim Research Institute is also anxious to investigate. If this matter were removed, then there would be no obstacle to the success of this, the „best of all plastic stoppers“ (a statement, which has also been made by several German researchers). The current issue revolves around this matter. Each bottler was lured into a false sense of security, as the allegedly safe, technical plastic stopper actually contains a certain rest risk. Plastic stoppers have the same problem, then as their older brother, the natural cork stopper. Synthetic stoppers are likely to have a belly landing, sooner or later, reverting to the natural corks. The latter themselves, however, are in their own proverbial glass house, as there are also cases in which great euphoria is followed by even greater disappointment. One only has to think back to the Ohlinger’schen Microwave-Delfin method; Cork stoppers treated in this method were subject to noticeable fractures – as expected – due to the TCA matter, almost solved by the microwaves. Absolute security cannot be guaranteed either by natural cork stoppers or by plastic stoppers. Individual liability, then, has been and will remain in question!

Background

600 million plastic cork stoppers were sold worldwide in 2003 by the US company Nomacorc, of which 240 million were sent to Europe. In that year, the billion barrier was expected to be broken; for Europe, figures of over 400 million were envisaged. As the demand for co-extrusion processed stoppers rose strongly in Europe, a 13 million US-Dollar investment was made in building a new, 6,000m² company base in Thimister-Clermont, Belgium. Previously – since the company itself started up in Europe in 2001 – the company was based in neighbouring Eupen. From a sales office with 3 members of staff, the production team has grown to 80 staff. Since November 2003, the Rohlinge that are produced in America with silicon are coated, and stamped with the company logo. From 2006 onwards, in accordance with current plans, Thimister-Clermont will also take on the extrusion of synthetic stoppers. Currently, Nomacorc has a market share of 4% in the world plastic stopper market for use with wine bottles.

A question to ...

DDW / web: Mr. Giesse. How did Nomacorc react to the “Talc Crisis”?

Michael Giesse: “With the finishing process itself, the extrusion, no changes have been made – this process fits in with the strict criteria of the US Federal Drug Administration (FDA) as well as the European treaty agreements on foodstuffs. Even before the “Talc Crisis”, Nomacorc had begun a three-year programme to improve quality, and had appointed Antoinette Morano as a Sensory manager. This is the first time this has existed in this field! Furthermore, the new production facilities in Belgium should be certified in accordance with ISO 9001 – and Nomacorc achieved the equivalent certification in the USA in November last year.”

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