



Cork's not screwed

Successful efforts to reduce TCA in corks has proved that the closure issue is not an open and shut case, says **Chris Orr**

THE END of last year was an interesting time for those in the closure business. Within the space of a few months of each other, two of the major players in the cork business claimed to have found the solution to TCA problems in wine. Almost immediately afterwards, a study conducted by marketing specialists, Wine Intelligence, showed, from a survey of 1,150 consumers, that there seemed to be an overwhelming desire among the public to keep corks as the closure of choice.

In the study, some 99% of respondents said they were either positive or neutral about corks, while almost 60% of those questioned said that they would not buy a bottle of wine with a screwcap closure.

The timing, as far as cork manufacturers were concerned, could not have been any better. In November, Amorim launched its ROSA cork treatment process – a process it claims “reduces releaseable 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA) levels in cork by up to 80%”

The process was independently tested and verified by wine research laboratories across the globe, including the Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI), the Campden and Chorleywood Food and Research Association (CCFRA) in the UK and the Geisenheim Research Institute in Germany. All three tests found between

69% and 80% reductions in the level of TCA in samples tested.

Essentially, the new process involves treatment of the cork with steam, which removes volatile trace compounds from the cork cells, one of which is TCA. The benefits of treating cork with steam had been known for some time, but

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stabilising the process and turning it into a reliable, industrial option had proved elusive until the company came up with the ROSA system.

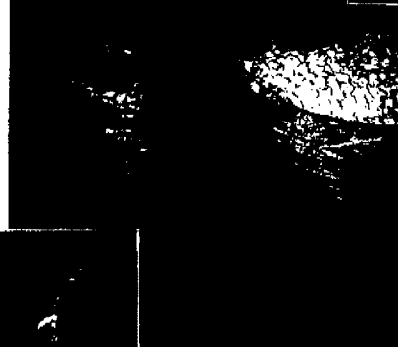
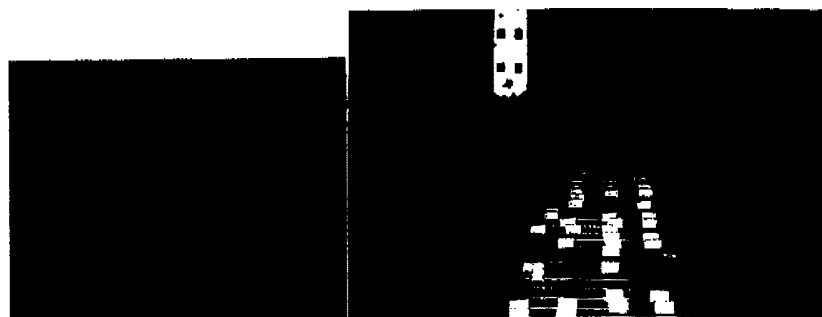
“Amorim’s whole strategy is based on using a combination of preventative and curative measures to avoid or remove cork contaminants at each critical point in the production chain,” said Professor Miguel Cabral at the time, head of research and development at the company. “ROSA adds a powerful curative measure to this armoury.”

Then last December, the French closures specialist, Sabaté began to push its Diamond process out commercially. It was first kicked off in 1996 as part of the company’s research and development programme. Once it had been perfected, and realising that it needed not just scientific but also trade support, Sabaté conducted exhaustive tests, convening a special panel of experts from scientists at the AWRI and CCFRA, as well as members of the press, retailers and wholesalers, all of whom had input into the trials themselves – how they were conducted and the results compiled.

The end-game was confirmation by the panel that the Diamond process, both scientifically, and also in terms of “perceived” taste of TCA, worked. Scientifically, the process was shown to reduce the TCA content of the cork closures tested to less than 0.2 parts per thousand (ppt) which, according to the statistician involved in the trials, essentially meant “anything under 0.2ppt isn’t actually present”

The process itself is very different from the ROSA process. It involves the supercritical CO₂ extraction process that the company developed in the late 1990s. It uses CO₂ in its supercritical stage, ie in a fluid state between being a liquid and a gas, to “solubilise” low molecular weight >>

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organic compounds – one of which is TCA in cork.

The gist of these two processes, according to their backers – and, in fairness, according to the

test results, independent research and analysis as well – is that TCA has been potentially dramatically reduced, if not virtually eradicated, from the cork manufacturing process.

So, on the face of it, it looks as if one of the main issues that has caused winemakers across the globe to turn away from cork and embrace new technology such as screwcaps and synthetic cork has been resolved. So where, theoretically, does this leave the manufacturers of the latter?

Well, if you dig a little deeper into the results of the Wine Intelligence survey, you'll find that in actual fact the results are not quite exactly black and white. One in three of consumers asked said their attitude to screwcaps had softened recently, while the view on synthetic closures was largely neutral – a finding that suggests they are easing their way slowly but surely into the consciousness of the UK consumer.

However, TCA is not the only problem faced by cork. Even if there have been significant efforts made to eradicate its damaging effects, there are plenty of

other issues with cork and closures that have yet to be clarified. "That's very true," admits Nicolas Serpette, communications director for Sabaté. "But this is a very significant step. There are other technical areas that need addressing, including more work done to ensure, whatever the closure, more help is given to producers to ensure that they are using the best product suited to their wine and using it to its optimum performance."

Carlos Dejesus, marketing director for Amorim agrees. "Every organisation has a limit to their resources, and the priority till now has been to tackle the problems of TCA," he explains. "But now we will be looking to other areas where there are issues, other processes and options that need to be maximised or improved. It's an

So where does this leave the manufacturers of screwcaps and synthetic corks?

old idiom, but one that's often forgotten: to stand still in this business is essentially to walk backwards. We have new products and implements scheduled with our research and development departments and we'll be looking at which areas to concentrate on."

The crucial question is, do they think these latest developments will halt the slow loss of market share to synthetics and screwcaps; or is it merely a way of maintaining some sort of growth opportunity over the long-term? "Well, to be honest, we're selling more corks than

ever before," claims Dejesus. "We developed ROSA as part of our commitment to providing our customers with an ever-increasing quality of product. It wasn't done as a reaction to falling sales or market shrinkage."

That may or may not be the case, but certainly it was only the debate over cork versus synthetic, that began more than a decade ago, that has galvanised the big cork firms into action. "We did indeed need – how do you say it in English? – a kick up the backside," admits Serpette.

The synthetic and screwcap manufacturers, however, don't appear to be overly worried by the developments. "We applaud any efforts to reduce or eliminate TCA," says a very diplomatic spokesperson for Supremcorq. "The primary goal for the closure industry is to assist wineries in bringing a consistent bottle of wine to the consumer. Any effort to achieve this goal is a positive step.

"We ourselves are continuing to enhance our product offering. One of the advantages of synthetic closures is that the product is manufactured, so that allows us to engineer enhancements into the product," she continues.

And Supremcorq is convinced that it is winning the battle when it comes to persuading consumers and winemakers alike of the efficacy of its product. "Our sales continue to increase and we believe consumers quite readily accept synthetic closures. Most consumers are either positive or neutral about the use of synthetic closures, and consumers' perception of the market continues to improve."

Perhaps the most balanced view of how these developments will affect the market as a whole, comes from Sabaté's Serpette. "Look," he says, "Screwcaps are here to stay. They have less than 3% of the market at the moment, with synthetics coming in around 7%, and the rest is cork, but screwcaps and synthetics are here to stay. We believe they will grow significantly. We don't think they'll take, say, 40% of the market, but sales will grow. All we've really done is to remove what was a sword of Damocles hanging over the cork closures sector – it was a big sword and quite perilous, but we think it has been removed now, and that's surely good for all producers." db