

SA bottlers' renewed confidence in natural corks

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International research teams found that a migration to alternative closures involved high risks

Leading South African wine producers have re-affirmed their confidence in cork as a quality stopper. This followed anti-TCA trials and the release of results that significantly strengthened cork's role as the wine stopper of choice for quality wine producers in South Africa.

Stellenbosch Vineyards, African Terroir and Pernod Ricard (SA) are amongst the wineries that have been involved in trials by Portugal's leading cork manufacturer, Amorim, to monitor the results of the company's assault on TCA. All of them support Amorim's claim of a substantial reduction in the incidence of TCA, adding that they've had no comebacks from local and overseas clients since the deployment of Amorim's anti-TCA strategy.

Sophisticated preventative techniques like gas chromatography enable Amorim's research and development staff to identify and isolate suspect batches of cork at every stage of production, while the anti-TCA Rosa process adds a powerful curative measure. The process involves the use of pressurised water and steam to eradicate remnants of unwanted volatile compounds. It was first used for granules that form the shanks of Twin Top corks. Amorim recently completed their validation of the process on cork discs and natural corks on an industrial scale.

'After using Rosa-treated corks we can validate Amorim's claim of a substantial reduction in the incidence of TCA,' says Delana Green of Stellenbosch Vineyards. Twin Top wine stoppers seal the company's highly popular Versus range. Apart from local distribution, the wines are also widely retailed throughout the UK and the Netherlands. Green says they have been keeping a close watch on the performance of the cork over the last year and have not received a single customer complaint during that time.

Pierre Smit of African Terroir says their experience with the Rosa-treated product enhanced their faith in the Twin Top

closure. He believes Amorim's renewed anti-TCA efforts have been highly successful over the past two years. 'Even prior to their introduction of Rosa-treated closures, the returns from millions of bottles we exported could be counted on one hand. The extraordinary low return rate is an excellent record, but we're looking forward to no comebacks at all, once Rosa-treatment has been fully extended to all our corks.'

Pernod Ricard's Jaco Boonzaaier confirmed that recent advances in cork technology and 'experiences' with suppliers of alternative stoppers have urged his company to appoint Amorim as its sole supplier. Pernod Ricard, which exports to 27 countries, has been using the Twin Top closure for two years. 'Even though not all our exports were under Rosa-treated stoppers, we've had far fewer returns from the UK since the start of last year. Therefore we fully support Amorim's claim of a substantial reduction in TCA,' says Boonzaaier.

Joaquim Sá of Amorim South Africa said R&D results achieved by his colleagues in such a short time should be emphasised. 'South Africa is in the forefront of wine making and is a key supplier to importers with high demands, such as the UK. Amorim Portugal understands our need to enhance consistency and listed South Africa as a priority.

'This enabled us to be consistent in our supplies to wine estates as well as the big wine merchants. The results of our comprehensive anti-TCA strategy filled us with pride and served as a great motivation,' he said. Surveys - including a recent one amongst England's demanding wine consumers - have shown that the overwhelming majority prefers cork to alternative stoppers.

International research teams found that a migration to alternative closures involved high risks and needed careful consideration. A key risk was that the wrong choice of closure could alienate consumers and lead to loss sales and profits. Where presented with a choice of closures, consumers clearly ranked cork as their favourite, with synthetics in the second place and screw caps a distant third, with a nearly sixty percent

negative response to the latter. These rankings remained the same, irrespective of how the results were analysed.

'On the one hand the consumer clearly associates cork with quality and prefers it to any other type of closure. On the other hand, alternative closures have confirmed limitations that many wine professionals and consumers aren't happy about.

'At Amorim we have the alternative to alternatives,' said Sá.

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