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FURTHER SUPPORT FOR CORK QUALITY IN USA

The performance of natural cork as a wine closure continues to win support in the US with the Washington-based French Wine Society emphasising that cork-related taint was not an issue at its annual conference staged in October.

Over 500 bottles of wine were opened at the French Wine Society Conference and only four were affected by 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA), commonly referred to as 'cork taint'.

"The numbers are pretty impressive," said French Wine Society education director Lisa Airey in a statement distributed by the society.

"Obviously we are seeing a very positive upswing in the soundness of natural cork.

"There was a message in the bottles we opened this year.

"Far too many people consider any off-aroma present in wine to be TCA. They claim the wine is 'corked'. This is unfair and it's time to set the record straight."

The French Wine Society announcement follows a report by Dr Christian Butzke — a leading American professor of enology and wine judge — that stated TCA is no longer a major problem for the United States wine industry.

In the report, published in the May/June 2009 edition of *Vineyard & Winery Management*, Dr Butzke said TCA was no longer a major issue from both a consumer and winemaker perspective.

Considered one of the leading wine experts in the US, Dr Butzke is a professor of enology at Indiana's Purdue University and is chairman and chief judge at the Indy International Wine Competition.

The French Wine Society is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of French wine in North America. Its 2009 conference was attended by 96 wine professionals from 23 US states as well as Canada and France.

“It’s nice to see the cork industry turn around a problem so completely, so resolutely,” said Julien Camus, French Wine Society president.

“The (TCA) problem made many producers turn to synthetic corks or screwcaps, but four tainted bottles out of 501, those are pretty good odds, especially since we poured some older vintages such as 1964 Maury, 1990 Rivesaltes and 1998 Vin Jaune.”

Amorim’s director of marketing and communications, Carlos de Jesus, said the French Wine Society’s positive assessment of natural cork was another sign of the progress the cork industry had made in recent years.

“It is very encouraging to get these unsolicited third party endorsements of natural cork quality,” he said.

“We know from our discussions with wine professionals on all continents that the industry recognises the progress that has been made in reducing the incidence of TCA contamination.

“While anecdotal evidence provides us with positive feedback our real focus is on scientific results and a number of independent analyses have provided scientific evidence of the improvement in cork’s performance.”

Perhaps the most comprehensive ongoing study is that undertaken by the US-based Cork Quality Council, which has been measuring TCA levels in bulk cork imports using GC/MS (gas chromatography-mass spectrometry) technology since 2001.

In recent years the average TCA count has dropped dramatically from 4.0 nanograms (parts per trillion) to less than 1.0 nanogram — which is well below human sensory thresholds.

Mr de Jesus said Amorim was continuing its significant annual investment in research and development as part of a program dedicated to continual improvement in the performance of natural cork.

In addition to the positive statements by the French Wine Society and Dr Butzke, leading US trade publication *Wine Business Monthly* said in its ‘2009 Closure Report’ that natural cork remains the highest rated closure among US wineries in terms of ‘overall perceptions’.

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