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A “RETURN TO CORK” DECLARED AT VINEXPO

Leading cork producers have declared a “return to cork” during the recent Vinexpo exhibition, citing strong sales figures for natural cork wine stoppers throughout 2010 and positive signs in the first quarter of 2011.

Major cork industry players attending the international wine and spirits exhibition in Bordeaux said they were winning back market share from producers of synthetic wine stoppers and screwcaps.

Portuguese Cork Association (APCOR) figures show that total cork stopper exports from Portugal — the world’s largest producer of wine corks — increased by 19.4 per cent in 2010 following several years of gradual decline in export volumes.

“The cork industry will look back on 2010 as the year in which cork turned the corner and started to win back some of the market share it had been losing to alternative closures over the previous decade,” said Carlos de Jesus, Amorim’s director of marketing and communications.

That certainly was the case for Amorim, the world’s leading cork producer, as the company recorded its best ever annual sales result in 2010, selling more than 3 billion cork wine stoppers.

Amorim recorded significant sales volume growth in all of its major ‘Old World’ wine markets, with France, Italy and Spain breaking historical sales figures with growth rates ranging from 10 to 29 per cent.

In the United States, Amorim registered a 22 per cent growth in sales volume, posting yet another sales record in this key ‘New World’ market.

Premium wineries in the US are continuing to increase their use of natural cork closures, with wines in the ‘Top 100’ that use cork consistently showing higher sales volumes and greater revenue growth than wines sealed with alternative closures, according to the Cork Quality Council’s ongoing analysis of sales data compiled by A.C. Nielsen.

American consumers have also shown a strong preference for cork in a number of independent studies undertaken in recent years.

This has been reinforced over the past 12 months by the success of the 100% Cork campaign developed by APCOR and the Cork Quality Council and launched in June 2010. The campaign's Facebook page has surpassed 50,000 fans to become one of the top wine-related social media communities, while approximately 200,000 people have viewed the campaign's videos.

The 100% Cork campaign encourages US wine consumers to choose wine sealed with natural cork stoppers and seeks to influence winemakers and retailers to choose natural cork over alternative closures. A growing number of wineries and winemakers have endorsed the campaign, as has the Sommelier Society of America.

Mr de Jesus said one of the main drivers for consumers was an appreciation of the environmental attributes of natural cork.

"The environmental message has certainly struck a chord with consumers worldwide," he said.

"And within the wine industry there is an increasing awareness of cork's environmental advantages and acknowledgement of the added value a quality natural cork closure brings to a wine."

In the United Kingdom, two major supermarket chains committed to using Amorim's environmentally friendly FSC corks in 2010.

Sainsbury's has made all of its corks Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified, while The Co-Operative Group committed to putting a third of its own-label wines under FSC corks.

The return to natural cork closures by major retailers in the United Kingdom saw Amorim's sales in this market increase by almost 50 per cent in 2010.

"It really is a combination of factors that is driving the return to cork," said Mr de Jesus.

"Firstly, and most importantly, there have been significant improvements in cork's performance as a wine closure over the past decade.

"Then there is consumer preference, the environmental factor, the added value a cork closure can bring to a wine, and growing concerns over issues associated with alternative closures."

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