

# BARK TO BOTTLE

NEWSLETTER  
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## Taint what you think

The difficulty of identifying wine faults came into sharp focus at 'The Harpers Debate' in London organised by the influential wine and spirits magazine, Harpers, on March 16.

The seminar included a workshop on wine faults run by specialist chemist Geoff Taylor of Corkwise. Masters of Wine, buyers, wine sales and marketing executives and international journalists Richard Neill and Tim Atkin were among the leaders in the UK wine trade who attended.

The participants were asked to assess five wines. Four had common faults and one was sound. The wines were checked in advance by a Master of Wine.

The results presented at the end of the workshop showed how hard it is, even for experts, to identify wine faults, and put a real question mark over claims about levels of TCA contamination that are not based on scientific analysis.

Not one of the 91 tasters got all five wine assessments correct, while one-third failed to identify a single fault correctly. Forty percent got only one right, 21 percent got two right, six percent got three right, while only one person—a second-year Master of Wine student—got four out of five right. Only two of the 91 tasters correctly identified the TCA fault.

The fact that there were between 15 and 23 different assessments given for each wine further highlighted the difficulty of correctly identifying wine faults.

According to a spokesperson for Amorim, which sponsored the Harpers Debate, the results presented at the end of the workshop were not surprising.

"These results confirm how difficult it is—even for the experts—to analyse wine faults and how careful you have to be in making judgments.

"We are not saying that wine taint is not a problem or that cork is never at fault. Indeed we are investing millions of dollars in research and development to improve the quality of our product and minimise faults.

"But clearly, unsupported assumptions about the levels of TCA and making the cork the scapegoat are influencing people's perception of wine faults, whereas we know from our own scientific testing that these claims are greatly exaggerated."

The Harpers Debate was on the subject 'Nature versus Nurture'—whether terroir or technique is more important in winemaking.

As well as Geoff Taylor, the international line-up of guest speakers included Jim Clendenen, winemaker at Au Bon Climat winery in California, 'flying winemaker' John Worontschak, Angela Muir MW, the renowned 'Mrs Fixit' of the UK wine world and Mike Paul of Southcorp.





## Boycott plastic: Ethical Consumer

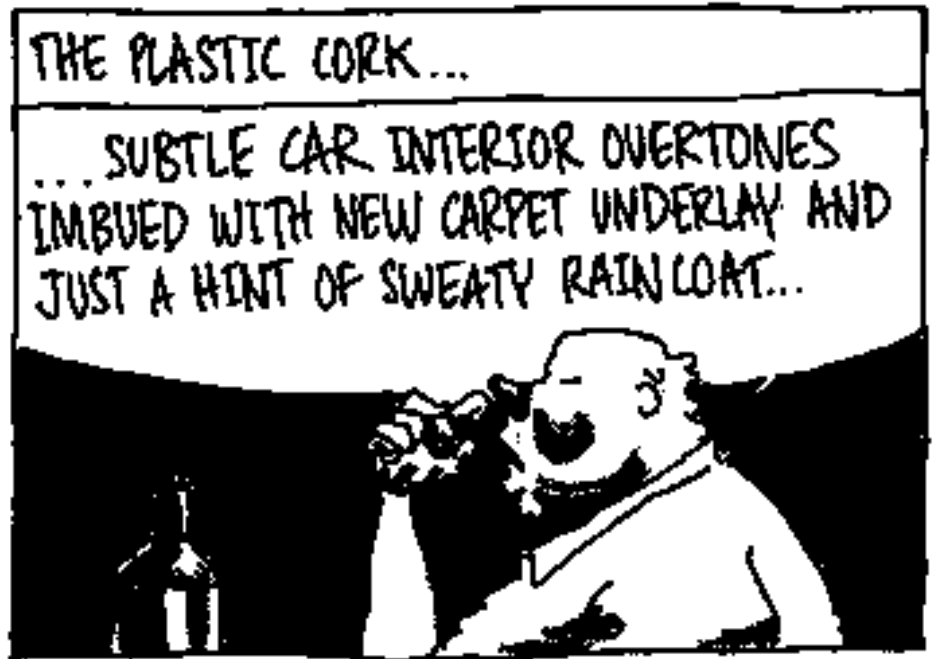
Major UK supermarkets are already receiving letters from concerned consumers following the call by Ethical Consumer Magazine for consumers to boycott wines sealed with plastic stoppers and the retailers who sell them.

The December/January 1998/99 edition says, 'EC urges consumer to consider buying their wine elsewhere and to write to (named supermarkets) and the others explaining why. We are also planning to keep a register of wines sealed with plastic corks, with a view to publishing it in the future.'

EC is concerned about the impact of un-biodegradable plastic stoppers on 'already hard-pressed landfill sites'. According to EC, claims that plastic is recyclable are misleading.

'With the best will in the world, they will come to nothing if most people simply throw them in the bin, which they will unless plastics recycling is universal and compulsory. Because of this, plastic corks in their millions are likely to remain in landfills indefinitely for future generations to deal with.'

EC pointed to the importance of the cork forests to the eco-systems of the western Mediterranean and the sustainability of the cork industry which supports some 25,000 jobs in Europe alone.



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## Off flavours from plugs

A mounting body of evidence is emerging that plastic plugs react with wines to alter the flavours.

A report in *The Age* by Epicure Editor, Stephanie Wood, talked of finding 'some decidedly odd aromas' in an under \$10 bottle from a large Australian company. 'Perhaps Texta pen or wet paint' (*The Age*, 23 March).

And according to the *Brisbane News* (24 February), a trial by Pam Dunsford of Chapel Hill 1997 Unwooded Chardonnay under cork and plastic 'provided some astonishing results'.

'Neither was faulty but one wine was clearly superior. The other lacked flavour. Pam has found that the synthetic corks strip the flavour from the wine'.

The report echoes comments from Dr Bailey Carrodus, of Yarra Yering, who tested his No. 1 Red under natural cork and plastic over three years.

Dr Carrodus told *Wine Magazine* (November 1998), 'The wine with corks was deeper and smoother than that with the synthetic closures.'

There was a flat, synthetic flavour with the synthetic cork wines, rather like the effect of putting Vaseline in your mouth.'

In another trial, Vinkem, a leading supplier of materials and services to the Australian wine industry, found that none of the wines tested under Supremecorq was fresh after 12 months and after 24 months the 1996 Chardonnay was 'obviously oxidised and virtually undrinkable', while that under cork was 'well integrated'.

Tyrrell's Wines are reported to have had a similar experience with trials of their 1995 vintage Vat 1. An article in the *Canberra Times* (3 January) reported, 'At 24 months the wine under cork remained youthful and fresh and showed clear varietal character. Those under Supremecorq appeared darker in colour and lacked the fresh fruit character of the cork samples.'

And oenologist Karen Ernsberger of Sonoma's Benziger Family Winery was reported in *Wine Spectator* as having serious concerns about plastic

'They seem to hold great for a couple of years, then oxidise. The wines were brown and weird. They had a marked plastic character.'

## Drop us a line

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## CORK - The Myths Exposed

### Myth:

*All corks are the same.*

### Fact:

There is a large variation in the quality of corks, depending on the raw material used and the production processes adopted by the cork manufacturer.

Individual cork manufacturers produce a wide range of corks to suit the particular requirements of their customers.

There are traditionally seven grades of natural cork. Ultimately, it is the winemakers who specify the quality, dimensions and finish of the cork used in their wines.



# Wildlife under threat

An international campaign urging shoppers to reject wine closed with plastic closures is being staged by Europe's largest wildlife conservation group.

The British based Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is leading the campaign as native cork forests and birdlife come under threat by the introduction of plastic closures in wine.

According to the Society, 42 species of birds including the endangered Spanish imperial eagle are dependent on the vast cork oak forests of Spain and Portugal.

By undermining the economics of the cork industry, the introduction of plastic closures would see the end of cork forests as farmers switched to cash crops such as sunflowers and olives.

With a million members in Britain, the powerful RSPB is urging its supporters and the public to boycott plastic closures and insist on wine closed with natural cork.

It is also lobbying British supermarkets and wine retailers to label bottles so their customers can choose wines with a natural cork closure.

"It is vital that consumers are given the choice and labels show which wine contains real cork stoppers," said RSPB agricultural policy officer, Hannah Bartram.

"It is not always easy to see until the bottle is opened. We appeal to the public to help."



*A Red Kite – one of 42 species dependent on cork oak forests*

# Processing

The early stages of cork processing play a critical role in the production of a technically perfect natural cork wine closure.

After the cork bark has seasoned in the forest, it is transported to the factory, where man and technology take over from nature.

The cork planks are first boiled in water at 100°C (212°F) for 90 minutes to remove impurities and make the bark more pliable.

The cork planks are then stacked on pallets to stabilise for between two and three weeks. During this time the cork planks become flatter and reach their optimum humidity for processing.

Each plank's border is then prepared and its edges trimmed before sorting. The planks are sorted into seven quality categories based on their thickness, porosity and appearance.

Planks which contain faults are eliminated and granulated for use in other cork products such as composition cork sheets and floor tiles.

Only the best quality planks are chosen for natural cork stoppers and disks for champagne and Twin Top corks. The residue from these planks is granulated to make the bodies of the champagne and Twin Top corks.

At this stage the planks are boiled again, then sliced into strips slightly wider than the final length of the cork stopper.

These strips are then punched along the grain of the bark. An automated machine can punch 45,000 corks a day. The very best

quality bark is still punched by skilled workers, who can punch up to 20,000 corks in a day.

The corks are then polished to ensure that the ends are regular and that the stopper is the length required. Again they are washed, this time in hydrogen peroxide, to ensure they are thoroughly clean and suitable for contact with the wine.

This initial stage of cork processing is completed with the corks being dried in ovens with sterilised air up to a level of six to eight per cent humidity. They are then ready for sorting and finishing.

As part of its strict quality control regime, Amorim selects samples at each stage of this process for exhaustive laboratory testing.

It has laboratories in each of its plants as well as a central research and testing laboratory.

*Cork planks are boiled at 100°C*



*The best quality cork is punched by skilled workers*





## In brief

### Recycling Relief



*Jancis Robinson promotes natural cork recycling on Red Nose Day*

Jancis Robinson and some of the biggest names in UK wine retailing—Tesco and Bottoms Up—put their weight behind a natural cork recycling initiative to raise funds for Wine Relief this year.

People were invited to bring their natural corks to special Wine Advisers at 30 participating Tesco supermarkets nationwide and Bottoms Up branches in London for Red Nose Day.

Wine Relief donated the proceeds from sales of a full-colour book by Jancis Robinson aimed at educating people about wine.

Wine Relief was an initiative by the wine trade which aimed to raise £1 million for Comic Relief, a major fund raising effort to support the disadvantaged and vulnerable in the UK and Africa.

### Tops in UK too

Research undertaken by independent market research agency, Clayton Reed Associates has revealed that UK consumers have a clear preference for cork.

The study, conducted last year, assessed UK consumers' attitudes towards wine closures and revealed that 84 percent preferred cork over plastic plugs.

Reasons cited for favouring cork included tradition, the 'pop of the cork' and an affinity with a natural substance.

### Cork & Seals moves

Cork & Seals, Amorim's wholly-owned Australian subsidiary, has moved.

Their new address—and the site of the new state-of-the-art Twin Top manufacturing facility to open later this year—is:

35-37 Kitchen Road  
Dandenong South  
Fax (03) 9791 7225  
Tel (03) 9791 7200  
Toll free 1800 335 397

# Recycling gets results for Guides

Guides Australia is delighted by the results of its cork collection efforts at three major events during the recent Melbourne International Food and Wine Festival.

The Guides collected corks for recycling at The Age Harvest Picnic at Hanging Rock, the Yarra Valley Grape Grazing Festival and the Herald Sun Cellar Door at Southgate during March.

Most wineries participating in the events were pleased to play a part in protecting the environment by keeping all of the corks they extracted for recycling.

Visitors to Yarra Valley Grape Grazing also brought corks to special Guides collection points at De Bortoli, Domaine Chandon, Lillydale and Yering Station wineries following the promotion of cork recycling on Melbourne radio.

The Guides used the well attended public events to distribute information about their cork recycling program and encouraged members of the community to play their part in recycling natural cork.

Co-ordinator of the Guides Australia Cork Recycling Program in Victoria, Jennie Bowles said cork recycling has been a major source of revenue for the Guides nationally since 1990.

"We collect natural corks as a way of supporting the environment and raising funds

for our outdoor activities, resources and facilities," she said.

"In nine years we have recycled around 75 million corks or 250 tonnes, which is a tremendous effort.

"We are quite passionate about the environmentally friendly qualities of cork—the fact that it is natural, renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable.

Indeed, wine corks are far too valuable a natural resource to be discarded as household waste for landfill."

The Guides collect natural corks from hotels, restaurants, wineries, clubs, hospitals, supermarkets and service clubs.

Many households also collect corks, giving them to their local Guides unit or depositing them at Body Shop stores throughout the country which serve as collection points for Guides Australia.

The corks recycled by the Guides are used to produce items such as engine gaskets, cricket and hockey ball inners, industrial safety mats, boat decking and horse float floors.

Over the coming year, Guides Australia will be increasing its natural cork recycling efforts with support from Amorim.

Discussions are also under way with the UK Girl Guides Association to include cork in their environmental badge and to start collecting cork for a recycling program.

For further information about the Guides Australia Cork Recycling Program, or details of your nearest cork collection point, call Guides Australia in your State capital.

*Talking cork. The Guides encourage members of the community to recycle natural corks*





## In brief

### Tops in UK too

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### Training sommeliers

Between January and March this year, some 300 sommeliers and wine waiters attended nine regional Amorim-sponsored Skill Build Seminars.

Organised by the Academy of Food & Wine Service, the seminars were designed to prepare competitors for the next stages in the 1999 Champagne Ruinart Sommelier of the Year—a prestigious annual competition designed to find the UK's best sommelier.

An important element of the seminars was educating participants about natural cork, its unique properties and modern cork processing technology.

### Educators on tour

Seven members of the UK Association of Wine Educators visited Portugal in January and included a two-day tour of Amorim's facilities in their itinerary.

Amorim's main laboratory, production plant, Champcork and Raro facilities along with briefings from Amorim executives and board members were included in the group's tour.

"It was a fascinating insight into the production and uses of cork. I was most impressed with the care and controls that operate within the company," said Sue Crabtree.

Another member, Byrony White concurred: "I was impressed to see the level of up-to-date technology and quality control used in Amorim's cork production processes—in particular the INOS II process."

Each educator conducts up to 40 tutored tastings a year, speaking to over 10,000 wine interested consumers throughout the UK.

### Guides recycle 'down under'

The Guides movement is the major force behind natural cork recycling in Australia. Since 1990 the Guides have recycled some 75 million corks and were delighted by recent efforts at three major wine industry events.

Discussions are under way with the UK Guide Association to include cork in their environmental badge and to start collecting cork for a recycling program.

# What a corking idea



Jancis Robinson promotes natural cork recycling on Red Nose Day

Jancis Robinson and some of the biggest names in wine retailing—Tesco and Bottoms Up—put their weight behind a natural cork recycling initiative to raise funds for Wine Relief on March 12.

People were invited to bring their natural corks to special wine advisers at 30 participating Tesco supermarkets nationwide and Bottoms Up branches in London for Red Nose Day.

Wine Relief donated proceeds from sales of a full-colour book by Jancis Robinson aimed at educating people about wine.

A spokesman for Tesco said, "We were delighted to be supporting Red Nose Day by collecting used corks to be recycled, with the proceeds going to Wine Relief."

Wine Relief is an initiative by the wine trade, which aimed to raise £1 million for Comic Relief this year.

Other activities included the biggest ever 'Can you tell red wine from white wine?' blind tasting.

The funds raised will go to helping disadvantaged and vulnerable people in the UK and Africa