



## Latest twist in the tale

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It used to be all about TCA, now it's more about oxygen transmission. But, as Claire Hu discovers, the closures debate is still raging

Judging by the strength of feeling - which almost became a full-blown row - at a seminar on the subject at this year's London Wine Trade Fair, the debate over how best to seal wine bottles remains a contentious one. It is a reflection of the competitive and changing nature of the market, which is continually in flux with an ever-growing choice of new closures for producers and retailers .

With the alternative closure sector estimated by Nomacorc to represent 33 per cent of the total market in 2007, the debate these days has moved on from cork and susceptibility to TCA to the effect of oxygen transmission on wine development in the bottle. Natural cork has historically had the advantage in this respect, with decades of track record to show the material is well-suited for allowing just the right amount of oxygen through, but now alternative closure suppliers are developing new versions which offer different degrees of permeability.

The problem for producers and retailers in choosing closures, whether a natural cork, a Zork or an Intergra Plus, has been a lack of credible and unbiased research. This is changing, however, with manufacturers carrying out tests on the impact of oxygen on wine evolution. And in the next couple of months, a major trial, which one closures boss described as "huge", will be launched involving wineries and closure suppliers. The two-year project will examine the impact of different closures, including screwcap, synthetics and cork-based products, on five or six wine styles.

Dean Banister, international commercial director at Oeneo - which produces several different DIAM treated cork-based closures, each offering different gas permeability - says the company has carried out research based on finding the optimum level of oxygen permeability for different wine styles. Trials carried out with wineries revealed closures that were more permeable tended to result in more secondary characteristics - but the results were sometimes surprising. "For example, I would have thought a Sauvignon Blanc would be better suited to low transmission but a tasting showed that isn't always true," says Banister. "It proved there are no hard and fast rules ."

He says more openness between suppliers - rather than just pushing one closure as a solution - is vital if they want to advance knowledge. "Each closure has its advantages. It's a question of making wine better for the consumer - isn't that what it's all about?," he says. "I believe all types of closures have a place in the market ."

Olav Aagaard, director of global research at synthetic closure manufacturer Nomacorc, the largest producer of alternative closures, agreed gas transmission was the hot topic in closures. "Our research involves finding out what's happening after bottling," he says. The company is this year launching Nomacorc Classic +, which delivers a 33 per cent lower oxygen transfer rate than Nomacorc Classic, helping to prevent oxidation. It also aims to be easier to remove and re-insert.

Croxsons, which supplies screwcap and Zork, has a new screwcap on trial called Korked, which aims to address the problem of oxygen blockage by the form of closure. Developed in Italy, the closure allows a controlled permeability through a hole and an organic polymer membrane. Marketing manager Tim Croxson claim s: "It allows wine to age in the same quality as natural cork. We are waiting for the results of a trial ."

Meanwhile, Guala Closures Group has tried to address the problem of some screwcaps looking cheap and cheerful with its new Wak product. Aimed at mid-range or premium wines, it has a closure thread not visible externally , as it is inserted into a long, specially-formed aluminium shell. Global wine co-ordinator Franco Cocchiara says: "The Wak combines the appearance of a traditional closure with the benefits of a screwcap, and we believe this will help overcome any consumer reticence." ?

Disclosures

| The global wine market last year used 17.5 billion closures.

| The alternative closure sector grew by around 30 per cent between 2000 and 2007.

| By 2010 it's estimated that the closures market will comprise 53 per cent cork (includes natural cork, technical and agglomerated closures), 29 per cent synthetic and 17 per cent screwcaps.

(Figures: Nomacorc)

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