

# Horses for courses

The wine closure debate has rattled on for more than two decades but, with cork seeing renewed popularity through better quality and choice, it's becoming a matter of personal preference. Paul Gander reports

The best choice of wine closure is an ongoing debate. Each manufacturing sector – be it natural cork, synthetic cork, glass stopper or metal screwcap – has research statistics which will outweigh all others in their favour. It seems to be an argument that will have no closure.

Despite a decade of bad press, cork still dominates the wine industry and the premium sector in particular. Demand for natural cork is on the increase again with global market leader Amorim reporting its sales last year “the best since the last century”.

The cork producers play heavily on the material's sound environmental credentials while claiming “cork taint”, or TCA (the spoilage agent), is almost totally a thing of the past. This follows significant research into and development of cork harvesting and manufacturing methods on the part of the major players in Portugal.

The result has been a dramatic reduction in the risk of TCA from an alleged high of 10% spoilage to new lows of less than 1% – if sourced from producers adhering to the new quality control standards and with access to the latest treatment technologies.

The link between TCA and cork was established some 25 years ago and this initiated the emergence of an entire industry of synthetic cork manufacturers, followed by a roller-coaster move to screwcaps by New World producers.

At the time it was thought the musty-smelling

taint of TCA could only be caused by a faulty cork. Today, however, we know better and cork producers are quick to point out that many such wine “faults” can be attributed to a number of causes and that the winemaker, rather than the cork, is as often as not to blame.

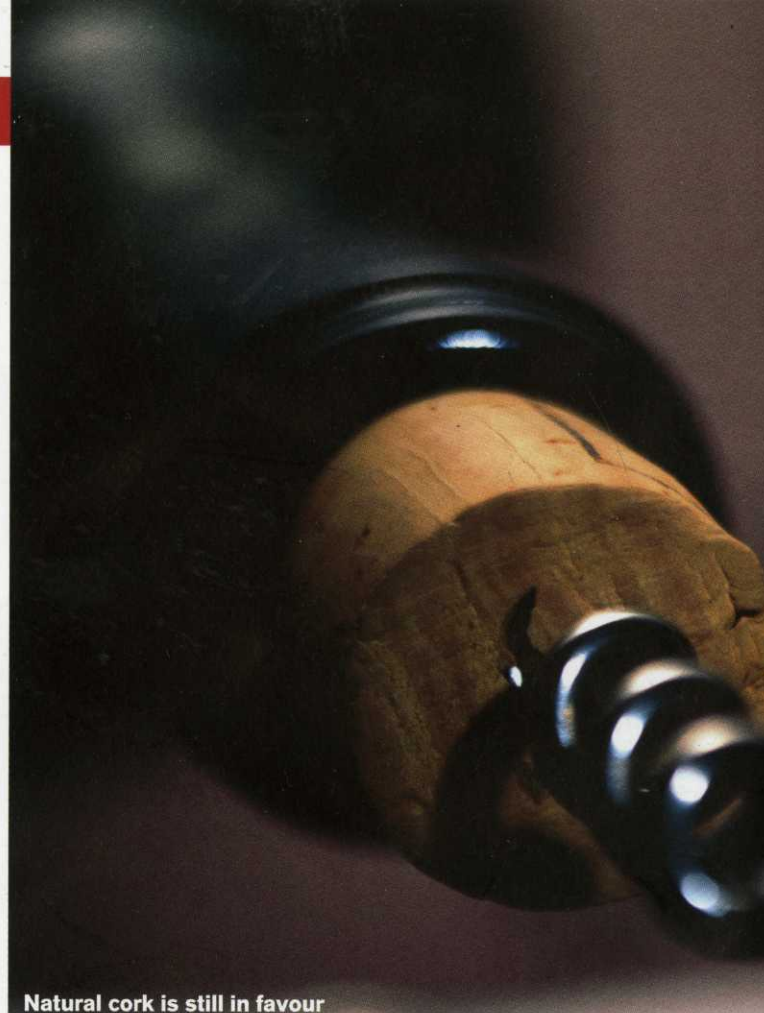
The Cork Quality Council says that in the five years following the implementation of the new standards and installation of high technology treatment systems, the occurrence of TCA in corks from Portugal has fallen around 80%. But cork, after all, is a natural product so the defect rate can never be nil. So for some winemakers – having lovingly nurtured their wines from vine to

cask to bottle – not even 1% wastage is desirable.

Nomacorc, one of the world's leading alternative wine closure producers, claims its synthetic “corks” provide consistent, predictable oxygen management and protection against off-flavours due to oxidation, reduction or cork taint. They have a foamed inner core layer and a flexible outer skin. The co-extrusion manufacturing process, the company says, creates a uniform product – unlike nature – and, therefore, predictable oxygen transfer rates.

Improvements in this process have resulted in an improved version of its best selling Classic closure with a claimed 25% lower oxygen transfer

Natural cork is still in favour



## Innovation in tamper evidence

A tamper-evident aluminium closure on Diageo's Johnnie Walker whisky brand won the Metal Packaging Manufacturers Association's Best in Metal 2008 Closures Award.

Using a technically innovative manufacturing technique, United Closures & Plastics has created a patented system in line with the shaped closure, combining a traditional aluminium roll-on pilfer-proof closure with plastic component mechanical tamper evident system.

The result is a much higher level of tamper evidence which maintains the standard twist-off opening operation.



