

Abstract

Problem / Objective

The increasing demand of cork closures in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a decrease of quality of the cork and, as a consequence, an increase of TCA. In order to compete with new and modern closure systems and to regain the image of cork as the “perfect closure” for quality wine, the cork industry was forced to invest heavily in the combat against TCA.

How successful has the cork industry been in combating TCA? And were they too slow reacting on cork’s bad image as the troublemaker causing mouldy tainted wines? How good are the alternatives and is there a thing as the “perfect wine closure”?

To answer the questions above the thesis will cover the methods used by the industry to minimize TCA and the results so far. It will also cover the response by the wine producers and the alternative closures as well as pros and cons for all options available.

Motivation

Both as a wine professional as well as wine enthusiast, I have several times, had the experience of opening up a bottle of wine, pouring it into a wine glass and making that first sniff, just to realize that the bottle is faulty. Contaminated by TCA.

It has been difficult to avoid the public debate about the subject of cork during the last decade or two. The debate about cork-taint in the wine industry has been, mildly spoken, hectic. It has been a mess of an industry in crisis, angry winemakers, ignorant consumers as well as competitors lobbying to increase sales of alternative stoppers. Opinions, with and without scientific proof has been used to create some strong positions for anyone participating.

I chose this topic to get to the bottom of the subject and to weed out personal opinions, industry lobbying as well as superficial surveys.

Methods

My main focus was to use different scientific data. Adding authors as David Bird MW, Jamie Goode as well as many other chemists and knowledgeable wine professionals, interviewing head of research and development, Miguel Cabral from Amorim as well as broad spectrum of articles and statistics, has given me a much more scientific-based in depth knowledge of the subject.

Content

Section 1 covers an introduction to the subject, including the history of the cork closure. A comprehensive review of the raw base material of cork stoppers to give an understanding of the properties of the cork. Furthermore this section explains the reasons for cork decline and troubles.

Section 2 covers an examination of TCA and how it affects the wine. The methods the industry is using in order to combat TCA and a status of progress.

Section 3 covers the most important alternatives wine bottle stoppers in the current markets. It also covers the pros and cons of the options as well as an examination of “the perfect closure system”.

Section 4 covers the possible comeback of the cork. The market position in the most important markets and consumer opinions of wine closure options. It also covers the pros for cork that can help to achieve regaining the lost image as the perfect wine closure.

Section 5 is a conclusion. Including personal thought based on results from the thesis.

Summary of conclusion

Competition has always been the magical engine of progress throughout the entire saga of mankind. As decades of monopoly could have resulted in end of the saga of cork as a winestopper, the entire cork industry had a last minute wake up call and changed the conclusion. TCA is closed to being defeated definitely and currently it is much more of a race between screwcap producers improving quality and cork producers are recuperation.

The cork industry certainly speed up the process of renewing and making the industry innovative, despite the thousand-year-old raw material. The Helix cap, invented by Amorim, launched in 2013 is a very good example of this, including the convenience of the screwcap with advantages of the cork.

Consumption of wine has changed as much as the industry of closures. Wine today is mainly bought for early consumption and the consumer is looking for convenience and value for money.

For a wineproducers point of view there are many considerations to do before choosing a wine closure. Everything from product types, branding, target groups and price point to selling channels and distribution should be considered and strategies should be made carefully. From a “New World” perspective the market for alternative closures has huge potential and possibilities. Just think about the possible volume produced of 36 billion bottles of wines worldwide each year. While the cork industry relied on their monopoly, ignoring all complaints and problems, the market for alternative wine closures was in rapid speed, trying to meet every demand winemakers and consumers could have. New emerging markets such as China will impact the industry of wine closures. No doubts that this evolution will continue and the alternative wine closures will be in line to have their share of the profit.

Despite heavily investments in order to develop alternative wine bottle closures and lots of re-branding and huge marketing budgets, consumers still have strong feelings about cork. Surveys consistently show that most consumers still prefer cork as a wine closure. The traditions and romantics of pulling a cork from a bottle of wine have not yet been copied successfully.