

Cork disappoints yet again

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Although I claim no expertise as a wine waiter, I do always feel a little nervous when pouring wine for professional sommeliers.

I know they manage a neat circumcision of the capsule over the top of the bottle without recourse to the special foil cutter gizmo on which most of us amateurs depend. They also tend to get every drop of wine *inside* the glass. And I have never seen professional wine waiters having to clamp bottles between their knees the way I so often have to.

So I was not at my most relaxed recently when I opened the first of several bottles of wine I had carefully selected to serve one of America's best-known sommeliers over lunch chez nous in the Languedoc. He had treated me to several sumptuous wine dinners in New York and this was the first time I had had a chance to reciprocate.

It was hot. We needed a wine light enough to drink out of doors (not many Languedoc whites fit that bill) with an aroma piercing enough to slice through the *tramontane* that was rattling the leaves of the Judas tree overhead. What else would do for my wine-sensitive guest, the veteran of several days of heady Roussillon reds, but a Mosel Riesling? A Wehlener Sonnenuhr Kabinett 1999 from Dr Loosen in fact, the third bottle from a case shipped directly from Bernkastel involving none of that silly UK excise duty business. The perfect choice.

Well, not quite, as it turned out. As soon as I had pulled the cork, after only the briefest of skirmishes, we both screwed up our noses. Even in this wind, and even before a drop was poured, we could smell that nasty, mouldy smell that scientists call trichloranisole or TCA and wine lovers call cork taint. I crossed my fingers this was the briefest of aberrations, perhaps just the smell of the cork itself and not the wine. Fridge space is precious in a warm climate just before a four course meal prepared by a talented cook. I had no back-up bottle.

I filled everyone's glasses with the beautifully pale jade crystal liquid, hoping that despite this unpromising opening it would provide the same sort of piercingly fruity pleasure that the previous two bottles had done. 'Mmmm!' we nodded at each other, eyebrows working appreciatively over the first sip. We agreed the wine itself was delicious. Perhaps that nasty smell had been just a slightly tainted cork.

And then, within less than a minute, a great suffocating swell of metallic, musty nastiness rose up through the glass and throttled the delicate fruit and aromas of that poor little Riesling and we had all, reluctantly, to admit that this bottle was one of the heavily disputed fraction of wine on sale today that was fatally tainted by TCA (it tends to grow in the glass).

'Small crisis in the Midi, not many dead' this may be. But it is millions of instances like this (and I can immediately call to mind five recent experiences when bottles worth hundreds of pounds were spoilt in this way) that have set the world's wine producers on a collision course with the world's cork producers (mainly Portuguese).

A bitter atmosphere of recrimination and repudiation has built up between them when in fact they should have been working together to solve each others' problems for decades.

One of the biggest bones of contention is the exact proportion of all bottled wine that is contaminated by TCA. Some members of the wine trade, particularly in Australia and New Zealand where significant numbers of quality-conscious wine producers are turning in despair to screwcaps, put the proportion of wine affected by some sort of taint as high as 10 per cent. The official line about the 12,000 bottles opened in May in London for the annual judging of the International Wine Challenge is that four per cent were affected by cork taint.

And then last month the results of what is claimed to be the world's first independent survey of this controversial failure rate, overseen by the British trade body the Wine & Spirit Association, were published - and seem likely to set off another chain of acrimony. This survey involved 14,000 bottles tasted over 18 months by some of the most important wine retailers and importers followed by independent verification of suspected faults by trained quality control panels. One of the major companies withdrew from the exercise because the QC tasters confirmed such a low proportion of the faults identified by the company's own in-house tasters, just over a third.

Overall, the survey's most controversial finding is the relatively low, verified level of what it tactfully calls 'mustiness' - presumably so as not to offend the cork producers - at something between 0.7 and 1.2 per cent. (The tasters within the wine retailers and importers identified a much higher proportion.) But perhaps the most shocking figure is that these in-house tasters reckoned that a total of 3.4 per cent of the wine they tasted in the normal course of their work suffered some sort of 'commercially significant defect' - a failure rate that few industries would tolerate.

The cork industry has at last admitted there is a problem with taint, TCA, mustiness - call it what you will - although points out (quite rightly) that corks are not the only source of it. It has spent a great deal of money on public relations, telling wine professionals how hard it is working to research and solve the cause of the problem.

As for its communications with wine consumers, cork producers have been running a series of ads whose gist is 'Does your wine producer care enough about quality to insist on natural cork?' The irony here of course is that it is only wine producers who do care that every drop of wine they bottle is tasted untainted by TCA who are prepared to run the risk of using an TCA-free alternative such as those rather naff (and over periods of more than a year or two increasingly ineffective) synthetic alternatives or, even less aesthetically appealing, screwcaps.

The most bizarre PR campaign mounted by the cork industry is that every plastic cork or screwcap represents a nail in the coffin of southern Portugal's ecosystem. Even Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Prince Charles have been persuaded by this argument, which is pretty rich considering that total worldwide demand for natural corks continues to increase at an extremely healthy rate as wine producers in the most important wine-producing countries switch from selling in bulk to bottle. It will be a long time before cork forests shrink as a result of a switch to screwcaps and plastic cylinders.

See also [David Schildknecht on corks](#).