Four surveys from a synthetic cork manufacturer

16 Jun 2006 by JR

After my anti-plastic rant last weekend, I was bracing myself for comment from the industry. Simon Waller of Supreme Corq, one of the leading manufacturers of synthetic corks, has been contributing to the lively correspondence in Thoughts on synthetic corks in your turn. Now he sends some back-up data which in the interests of evenhandedness I make available to you...

I am sending you a summary (a power point presentation that you will need relevant software to download - JR) of the results of a study we commissioned from Wine Intelligence in 2004, where we asked 45 UK consumers each to open two identical bottles of wine sealed with a SupremeCorq and a competitor co-extruded synthetic. Consumers were allowed to choose either a waiter's friend or double-lever 'wing' type of corkscrew, whichever they were most familiar with.

Consumers were asked to rate their experience at every stage of the process - insertion of the corkscrew, extraction of the closure, removal of the closure from the corkscrew, reinsertion of the closure and overall impression. The results confirm what you obviously know already, the ease of extraction and reinsertion are highly valued by consumers. SupremeCorq was preferred on these ease-of-use criteria by 85% of the participants in the study.

I also attach the verbatim comments that consumers gave when asked a series of open questions at the end of the interview. These add some colour to the summary statistics and to me really reinforce the importance of choosing closures that are easy for consumers to use, in addition to them being effective seals of course. You are in a unique position to drive this point home to wine producers - I would recommend that on your travels you ask if any of them actually test ease of manual reinsertion. The AWRI included this point in their 1999 study, so a methodology does exist, but in my experience 99% of wineries around the world place zero value on this point. A lack of interest in the consumer from the wine industry? That's a subject for another debate...

I am also sending a summary of the results of our 24 month Competitive Closure Report that was completed nearly a year ago. We looked at the leading synthetic closures on the market as well as one-piece natural corks and 1+1 technical corks. You will see in the report that we refer to 'SupremeCorq New & Improved'. This was a product that we test-marketed and did not ultimately launch due to extraction forces being too low! SupremeCorq Original is the product that we have had since our company started, albeit with numerous processing developments to improve consistency of extraction force, permeability etc. We advise our customers that SupremeCorq Original is designed for wines with a maximum shelf life of two years, less in the case of rosé or unoaked white wines, even though some have had very successful results over longer periods. Some less reputable producers of synthetics raise false expectations amongst wine producers in order to make a sale - one Italian producer told me his closure would keep any wine fresh for 17 years! – which undoubtably has led to the disappointments you and some of your website correspondents refer to.

There is also a summary of the results of the second generation SupremeCorq - the SupremeCorq X2, which has been available for sale since January of this year. This is designed to respond to the many requests wehave received from the wine industry for a synthetic closure that is abetter barrier to oxygen. At this stage our X2 corq is performing at least as well as a one piece natural cork. Since the proof is usually in the pudding, the fact that one of our development partners in the project has just switched to X2for their white wines (replacing a co-extruded synthetic closure) is a very strong endorsement of X2. You will note from the test results that we have achieved this improved oxygen barrier performance without sacrificing any of the ease of consumer use that SupremeCorq Original also offers.

It is important to state that we do not believe that the perfect closure exists. All options have their advantages and disadvantages that I would be happy to discuss with you in person. As a supplier to the wine industry in pretty much every country where wine is made, all we can do in continually strive to improve our products by listening to the feedback from our customers, the media and from wine consumers. This is a tough strategy in a wine market suffering from severe over-supply, which is leading many producers to cut costs even if they sacrifice performance, but we believe that the successful wine companies will be those that do not distract consumers' attention away from the quality of the wine by selecting closures that they find difficult to use.