

WINES & VINES



The Authoritative Voice of the
Grape and Wine Industry Since 1919

August 2005

**STICKING WITH
CORK** • 16

SCREW/CAP
WINEMAKING • 20

**WINERIES SPONSOR
TRADE EDUCATION** • 28

MARKETING WINES
BY THE BLOCK • 32

ProCork Closure Promises Best Of Both Worlds

Jane Firstenfeld

Amid a frenzy of research, a flurry of promotion and an ever-expanding range of wine closure options from veteran and novice suppliers around the world, yet another stopper has popped up on the radar. ProCork™ has already made a splash in its native Australia, and its developers are optimistic that its U.S. debut, within the next year, will be equally successful. Will it provide the breakthrough technology to eliminate cork taint and boost the cork industry?

Despite wild popularity in both Europe and Down Under, U.S. producers have so far been hesitant to embrace the screwcap to a significant degree (see our survey, *Is Cork Still Top Stopper*, Sept. 2004 and *Sticking With Cork*, page 16 of this issue). Whether natural, composite or synthetic, the traditional cork-and-capsule is still the closure of overwhelming choice here, despite well-documented drawbacks. Perhaps, as some have surmised, wine is still so alien to American culture that this traditional package is deemed the only proper presentation of a beverage considered by many as, for better or worse, “high class.”

ProCork's developers sought to address these issues by combining the consumer-comfort level of natural cork and its acknowledged advantage for aging potential, while eliminating concerns about TCA contamination. Sensory and chemical testing by the Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI) on wines



Australian winemaker Matthew Barry (left) has bottled the super-premium wines at Mount Avoca exclusively in ProCork for the last three vintages. ProCork founder Gregor Christie (right) reports Barry bought most of the company's production in its first two years.

aged 18 months in ProCork, screwcap and natural cork confirmed that wines sealed with ProCork retained more SO₂ than screwcap or cork; exhibited better varietal character and less oxidation than cork and fewer reduced (rubber) characters than screwcap. (Complete test results can be viewed at pro-cork.com.)

ProCork combines a natural cork with multiple layers of ultra-thin membranes on each end, which both

seal out any detectable TCA contamination and enhance the cork's ability to “breathe.” According to the company's Web site, “Each membrane serves a different purpose, including oxygen regulation, reducing evaporation, taint prevention and flavor retention.”

Oxygen permeability is “greater than that of screwcap, and slightly less than the average for cork,” according to Dr. Gregor Christie, founder and CEO of ProCork Pty. Ltd., Melbourne.

In 2004, ProCork signed an agreement with Beringer Blass wine packaging subsidiary Vinpac International for exclusive distribution of its products in Australia and New Zealand. Vinpac executive Martin Caloghiris is credited with coining the phrase, "ProCork seals the future of cork."

Once Vinpac signed on, the new team hit the road to promote ProCork to the Australian and New Zealand industries. The month-long roadshow ran from May 10 through June 9, with nine stops in Australia and three in New Zealand. The workshop format included presentations by Christie, Caloghiris and other Vinpac executives, followed by comparative tastings of identical wines bottled under ProCork, screw-cap and natural cork, and aged for the same time period.

Nearly 400 winemakers attended the presentations. Afterward, Christie commented, "The most interesting and educational part of the presentation was comparative tastings of wine....Armed with greater knowledge of the oxygen permeability of each, it becomes a very interesting tasting."

Christie intends to stage an American roadshow tour when ProCork begins manufacturing the closures in the U.S. within the next year.

Before releasing ProCork commercially, the company enlisted the Portuguese cork research and development group, Centro Technologico da Cortica (CTCOR), for testing aimed directly at cork taint. CTCOR technicians deliberately contaminated natural and 1+1 technical corks with TCA, then coated some of the natural corks with the ProCork membrane. Identical wines bottled in the three samples were tested after 7.5 and 20 months.

The ProCork seal reduced TCA in the wine by 90-100%, Christie reported. "In half the sample of corks which were contaminated with TCA, our membrane prevented any detectable transfer," he said. After 20 months, TCA levels in ProCork-sealed wines

were below 1 ng/l, considered to be below trace quantities.

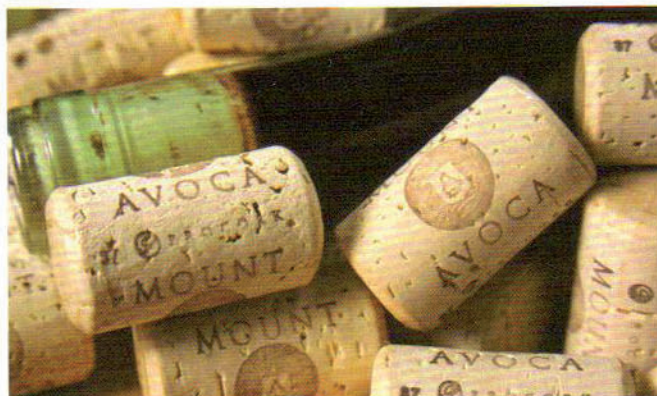
It's the secret formula of the multiple membranes that seems to set ProCork apart. In Australia, the company is already marketing a high-volume product dubbed the ProCork Blue, based on the familiar twin-top cork, with the membrane replacing the high-end cork disks. When asked what differentiates his stopper from the twin-tops, Christie retorted,

"You certainly don't want a poacher as your gamekeeper."

He said the Blue is priced to compete at the volume end of the cork market; other options use highest-grade natural corks, with the ProCork treatment adding only "fractionally" to the price. ProCorks look and feel virtually identical to natural cork, and share its consumer-friendly attributes of easy extraction and re-insertion.

ProCork utilizes a patented production machine, and the product's initial roll-out has been relatively smooth, according to Christie. "To date, we have supplied more than 10 million ProCorks to more than 100 customers," Christie said via e-mail. "One percent of the (Australian) market converted to ProCork on its release. We weren't expecting that," he acknowledged.

"At current rates, it will be 10% (100 million corks) within 18 months. You don't go through growth rates like we have without some strains, but they have been relatively minor. The technology backing (our) product has always been our major advantage, and our produc-



ProCorks look and feel like natural cork, because they are.

tion machine has held up well," he said. A second machine is currently being installed, which will "represent a considerable leap in terms of capability and reliability," according to Christie.

In addition to various Beringer labels, premium producers in Margaret River, McLaren Vale and the Yarra Valley have adopted the closure, which, Christie said, "has found a particular market in the premium end, with winemakers accepting that any wine which benefits from bottle aging will benefit from using ProCork."

Winemaker Matthew Barry, of the super-premium producer Mount

Synthetic Selection From Novembal

Novembal, a supplier of synthetic stoppers based in San Francisco and France, launched a new range of synthetic wine closures, Selection™. In color, shape and appearance, Selection stoppers are similar to natural cork, but they are produced from natural polymers that will not taint wine flavor.

The range is designed for easy extraction, reduced risk of breakage from corkscrews and easy re-closing of the bottle. Novembal reports that bottles closed with Selection corks can be safely stored in any position. The closure can be applied with manual or automatic corking machines without modification. For details, visit tetrapak.com.



suppliers may soon benefit from ProCork's innovation. "We are expecting that a number of cork suppliers will offer ProCork technology in the U.S. market," he concluded. ■

Avoca, has used the closure exclusively in his last three vintages. "He finds it suitable for his Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Chardonnay, but it also keeps his early-drinking Sauvignon Blanc fresh," Christie said.

"He purchased nearly all our production in the first two years."

Although Christie is not aware that any other manufacturer is producing a comparable product, U.S. closure