

Two Studies Measure Consumer Preferences for Wine Closures

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Stacy Briscoe joined *Wine Business Monthly* in 2018. She has been writing about wine professionally since 2015, freelancing for multiple publications including *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Edible Communities* and *Napa Sonoma Magazine*, among others. She also maintains her own website, *BriscoeBites.com*, dedicated to wine reviews and tasting notes. Outside of wine writing, she also contributes as a freelance editor for the independent publisher She Writes Press. Stacy has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English-Language Literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

DECIDING ON THE PROPER closure is one of the most important decisions a winemaker makes. It not only affects the flavor and aging process of the wine inside, but also the aesthetics—both visually and tactilely—in the consumer’s eye.

Traditional corks utilize precious natural resources, can be expensive and are, of course, at a higher risk for TCA taint. And yet they evoke a sense of elegance and romance for most wine drinkers. They symbolize a wine’s value and ageability.

The science and innovation behind alternative closures—from screw caps to synthetic corks, and even glass stoppers—are constantly evolving. Using a non-traditional cork now has the benefit of reducing a winery’s carbon footprint, as well as production cost, and often eliminates the worries surrounding cork-related taint issues. Yet, alternative closures tend to give the perception of a lower-valued wine, one that must be consumed straight-away and not preserved for either sentimental reasons or for enhanced enjoyability.

The following studies take a close look at how consumers react to various wine closures, how this translates to their perception of the wine and suggest that there may be hope for the success of alternative closures in the mass market in the near future.

Consumer Perception of PlantCorc Versus Traditional Cork

In 2013, **Vinventions’ Nomacorc** brand introduced PlantCorc, an alternative wine closure made from sugarcane-based polymers. The company claims using sugarcane not only cuts carbon dioxide emission by 90 percent, leaving a -1 carbon footprint, but that the product is also 100 percent taint-free: “With a consistent and controlled oxygen ingress, wine is preserved for up to 25 years and guaranteed TCA- and fault-free,” according to the company’s marketing materials.

How do consumers respond to this anti-traditional wine cork? For three months, from July to September 2018, Vinventions conducted a consumer research survey to assess consumers’ perceptions of the Nomacorc Reserva

PlantCorc closure against a traditional cork closure. The objective of the research was to answer the question, “To what extent does such a closure conform to the qualities of high-end wines?” in a world where alternative closures are often associated with lower-value wines.

Vinventions partnered with scientific marketing organization **Mind Insight**, to conduct the survey at the **Mind Insight Laboratory** in Louvain, Belgium. A total of 160 participants between 25 and 60 years old (50 percent men, 50 percent women) from France and Belgium were presented with an entry-level synthetic closure, a Nomacorc Reserva closure and a premium natural cork.



According to Vinvention’s head of wine marketing solutions division, **Romain Thomas**, all closures were shown for the same amount of time, at the same angle, with the same luminosity and with the script (“mise en bouteille”). The participants were not asked any questions, simply instructed to rate the corks on a scale from 0 to 100 on premium/luxury perception—all to “avoid biases and obtain relevant results.”

“Once limitations and biases were eliminated, consumers did not associate Nomacorc PlantCorc closures with low-quality wines,” said Dr. **Stephane Vidal**, vice president of brand management and enology at Vinventions, in a press release. “On a scale from 0 to 100 of premium/luxury awareness, they ranked it to be at 87 points.”

Thus, the results concluded that consumers associated the Reserva closure with wines that are premium-tier or above.

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How Closure Type Affects Perceived Intrinsic Attributes of Wine

The *International Journal of Hospitality Management* published a similar study¹ in 2018, looking at how closure type—natural, screw cap, synthetic cork and glass stoppers—affected the perceived intrinsic attributes of a wine (appearance, taste, aroma and overall quality). The study did not specify name brand, manufacturer or supplier of the various closures.

A total of 310 individuals from Pullman, Washington participated in the study. To ensure a broad range of participants, the study was held during **Washington State University's** 2013 Dad's Weekend. The study was conducted over three days to "enhance the representativeness of the sample."

Participants sat at a testing station and were presented with a placemat with labels that identify the wines to be tasted as "A," "B," "C" and "D" (although only two different red blends were used during the testing). Each placemat also had a photo display of a closure—natural cork, screw cap, synthetic cork and glass stoppers.

The study showed that wines associated with natural corks were rated significantly higher than wines with either screw caps or artificial cork. However, when compared to glass stoppers, there was no significant differentiation in the participants' ratings between the wines associated with glass and natural cork closures. When participants were provided only alternative closures—synthetic cork, screw cap and glass stoppers—to view alongside their wines, the wines with the glass stoppers were rated moderately higher than the others.

The study concluded that closure type does, in fact, influence a person's perception and experience of a wine and that, overall, consumers still prefer a natural cork. However, it also stated that, though the evidence was "far from decisive," glass stoppers may be an adequate replacement for luxury-tier wines looking to move away from natural cork usage. "Glass stoppers are very attractive, easy to open, reusable and, most importantly, help prevent cork taint," the study concluded, suggesting that industry practitioners should "capitalize on this opportunity and market the glass stopper as a luxury-style alternative to natural cork."

What the Wine Industry Should Consider

Despite the high marks for the Normacorc alternative cork and the "attractive" aesthetic of glass closures, it seems that traditional cork is still the overall winner in the wine closure race for consumer approval. Yet, both studies prove that, given the right type of closure, that race is a tight one.

What this means is that there are viable options for wineries and wine brands looking to deviate from tradition. But they must consider those options carefully: How does the closure fit in with the branding and design aesthetic? How does the closure preserve the wine? What does this closure say about the wine's style and/or flavor profile? And, arguably the most important, how will this closure type affect consumer perception, if at all? **WBM**

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¹ Reynolds, D. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* [2018], doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.05.023