

Cork Quality Council Reveals Results of Annual Natural Cork Audit

The CQC releases its latest data in cork-taint screening

Stacy Briscoe

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.

THE CALIFORNIA-BASED CORK QUALITY Council (CQC) conducts annual audits on thousands of corks, ensuring all quality control protocols in cork production are observed. One of the most important: screening for 2,4,6-trichloroanisole, or TCA. The screening process utilizes an analytical method developed by **ETS Laboratories** in St. Helena, CA.

According to the CQC guidelines, the process requires members to send a minimum of 250 corks taken from at least five separate bales. Corks are placed in 50-cork wine soaks for 24 hours to extract releasable TCA. ETS then analyzes these soaks and reports TCA at concentration as low as 1 part per trillion (ppt). If results of any one of the five soaks includes TCA as high as 1.5 ppt, the entire lot is flagged and removed from inventory.

In 2018, the CQC conducted more than 30,000 analyses. Results show that instances of cork taint continue to decline and that, overall, measurable TCA levels are now 97 percent lower than when the organization began this process back in 2001.

In the last reporting period, for the three months ending Dec. 31, 2018, 95 percent of all samples tested below 1 ppt. An additional 3 percent had results between 1 and 2 ppt, which meant those natural cork lots were rejected by the CQC.

“We developed this technology 20 years ago,” said **Peter Weber**, executive director of the CQC. “But we update our data every quarter so wineries know we’re continuing to find improvement.” Weber said that when the CQC,



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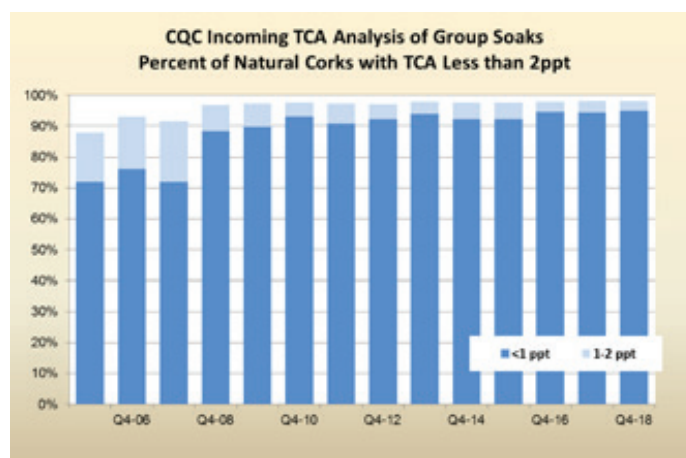
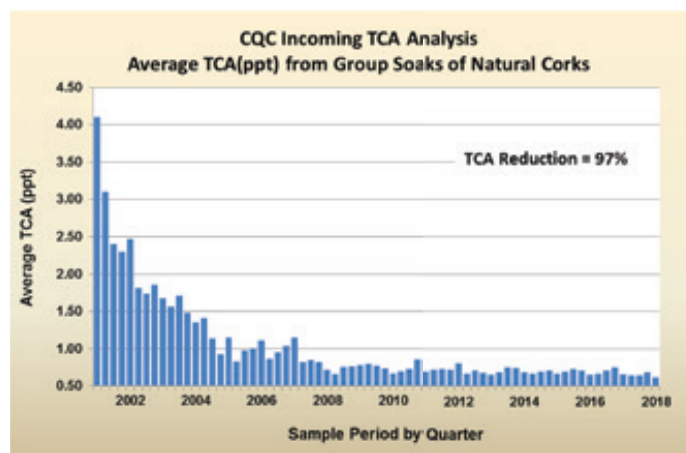


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in partnership with ETS, began the rigorous TCA testing back in 2001, a significant amount of TCA was found. Today, Weber said, nearly 90 percent of the corks tested come back with TCA levels that are “functionally zero.”

“We routinely run extended testing of a sample of our screening tests to get a picture of what is the nature of scores less than 1 ppt,” explained Weber. “In those extended tests, we get reports as low as 0.5 ppt. Currently, our testing shows that 90 percent of scores of less than 1.0 ppt were also less than 0.5 ppt.”

The CQC treats results below 0.5 ppt (results labeled as “undetectable”) as 0.5ppt for statistical purposes. With this assumption, the records cannot improve below 0.5ppt. “We can only report down to, but not less than, half a nanogram,” explained Weber. “When we slow the machine way down, we can see these numbers are technically below 0.5ppt, but it’s hard to put an exact number on it.” Though these results “could” be marked as zero, Weber said that would be presumptuous and, technically, inaccurate. “I don’t think it’s a concern because we don’t believe that TCA scores at that level are associated with any problems in wine,” Weber added.

Weber calls these audits an important step in the improvement in cork production over the past 20 years and said “the issue” seems to be “well taken care of.” “But we remain vigilant,” he said. “The cornerstone of the CQC is to make sure that cork taint will never be a problem again.” **WBM**



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