

## Another victory for synthetic closures over cork

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It was a small skirmish in the continuing war of the wine-bottle stoppers, but a recent filling and capping operation at a small winery in Walla Walla, WA marked another victory for synthetic closures over cork.

Sapolil Cellars had used high-density polyethylene closures on some vintages prior to its 2008 Gandy Dancer red blend, but its latest bottling sealed the deal on a permanent switch from cork. "We're not worried about the perception; we've had great acceptance from the earlier uses," says Abigail Schwerin, winemaker and co-owner of the winery. From a production standpoint, the latest bottling exercise also resulted in considerable time and labor savings.

*The Native American, Sapolil, and his help in constructing eastern Washington's Rawhide Railroad in the 19th century are saluted in the label design of Sapolil Cellars' Gandy Dancer wine. The winery is converting from cork to synthetic closures.*

Sapolil's wines retail at \$38-\$48—far from super premium, but not the two-buck-chuck territory originally staked out by cork replacements. When TCA, the off-odor created when mold and chlorophenols react in a cork, emerged as an issue in 2003, synthetic corks and screw caps were used in approximately 8% of wines worldwide. In today's US market, penetration is approaching 40%, and closure suppliers are eyeing a half share of the market in the foreseeable future.

Corking is a manual operation at wineries producing up to 50,000 cases a year; at 2,000 cases, Sapolil is well below that threshold. "A lot of times, hand corkers are not that efficient and put creases in the cork," complains Schwerin. "I nearly pulled my shoulder out using one." More problematic is creasing because of the quality assurance problem it presents. Cork allows some oxygen transmission, which Schwerin believes is critical to aging, so the winery opted for a polyethylene closure that promised to allow it.

She worked directly with Mario Carofanello, sales director for Batavia, IL-based Portola Packaging Inc.'s Zork USA division. Zork's synthetic stopper consists of a polyethylene plunger, foil overlay that serves as a vapor membrane and an outer cap welded to the plunger in an extrusion process. Portola licensed the technology from its Australian inventor and installed a dedicated line in Tolleson, AZ in 2007 to mass produce the units. According to Schwerin, the look emulates hand waxing, and it's done in a single step.

Carofanello also supplied Sapolil with four corkers—table-mounted hand cappers modified with a flange to handle the closures, which are bigger than bottle crowns. Schwerin expected 10 laborers to work two days to bottle 490 cases of Gandy Dancer. Instead, work wrapped up in 7 1/2 hours, including a lunch break.

For more information:

Mario Carofanello, Portola Packaging Inc., 707-484-9683,  
mcarofanello@zorkusa.com

