

How British discovery put a stopper on corked wine

A return to tradition is on the table after scientists identified the chemical that gave rise to an era of screw caps, writes **Andrew Ellson**

For decades upmarket restaurants have offered their patrons the chance to smell and taste their wine before drinking it.

The practice has long been thought necessary because of the risk of bottles being corked, meaning the wine has a foul taste or smell caused by the cork. Few realise that this age-old ritual has been rendered effectively pointless thanks to the work of British scientists who have all but eliminated cork taint.

Their success is leading growing numbers of winemakers to abandon screw caps and return to the traditional cork tops, which are favoured by drinkers and deemed to be more environmentally friendly.

Corked wine gives off a stench similar to wet cardboard because of a chemical called trichloroanisole, which forms when plant phenols, chlorine and mould interact. It most frequently occurs in natural corks and is transferred to the wine in the bottle.

At the turn of the century, corked wine was such a common problem that as many as one in ten bottles were affected, with most being undrinkable. Yet despite the frequent number of wines being corked, no one knew the what was causing it and many in the wine industry just

accepted it as one of the pitfalls of doing business.

However, British supermarkets, which were unhappy about the number of bottles being returned, decided to act and started threatening to sell only screw-capped bottles. This forced the wine and cork industry to establish the Quercus Project to investigate the problem.

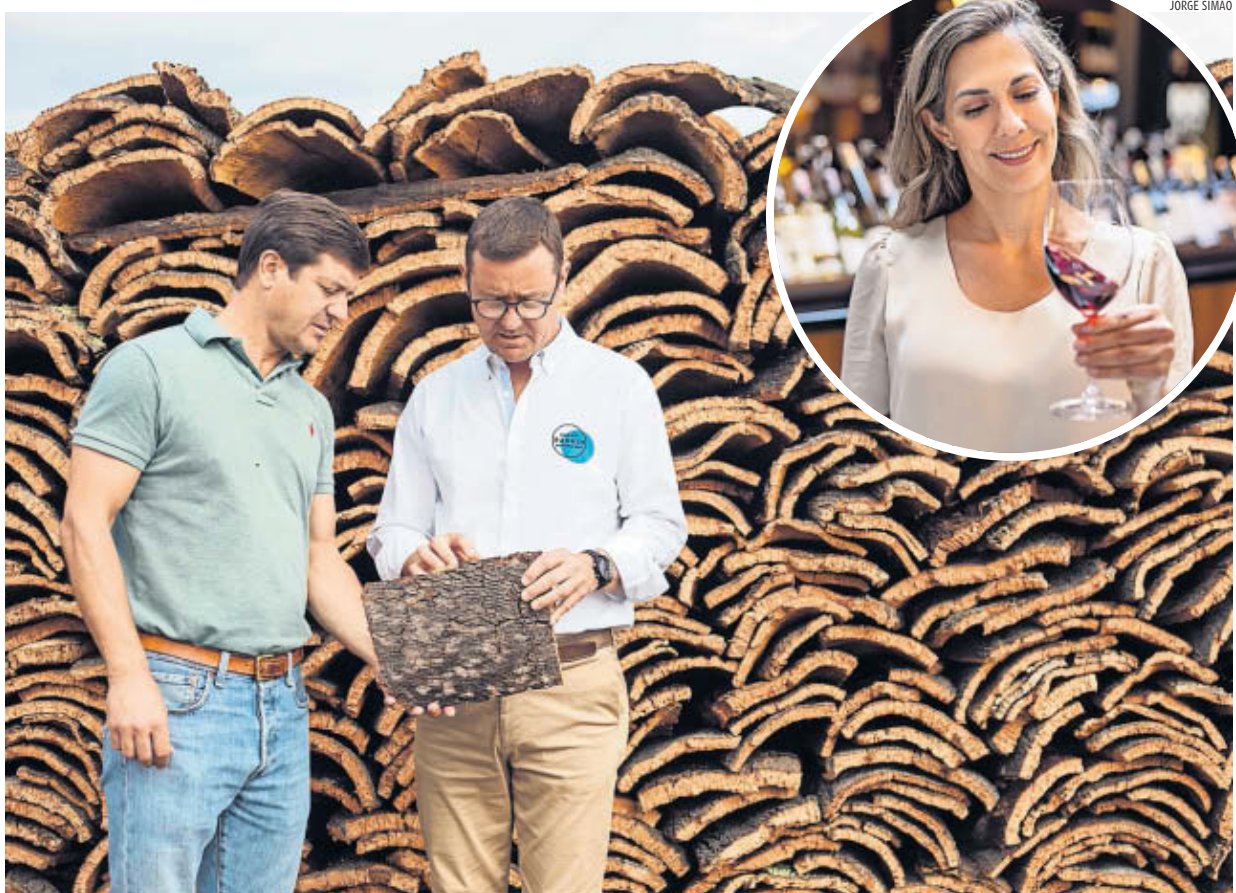
Over three years, scientists at the Gloucestershire-based Campden and Chorleywood Food Research Group, led by Martin Hall, the director of science, identified the culprit as trichloroanisole and devised strategies to stop the compound forming.

This led to new practices at cork manufacturing and bottling sites, such as cutting the lower damp part of the bark off, storing cork on concrete and metal plinths instead of traditional wooden ones, and replacing chlorine washing with steam cleaning.

Over the next couple of decades, the incidence of cork taint fell and recent tests suggest that only about one in two hundred bottles are now affected and even then, the concentration of the chemical is so slight that it cannot be detected by the human nose. Corked wine itself has always been safe to drink.

Jim Rankin, chairman of the Cork Industry Federation and owner of the 250-year-old British producer Rankin Brothers and Sons, based in Aylesbury, said: "In the 1990s, the reputation of the cork industry was at its lowest point. It's been a remarkable turnaround. And with the quality and reliability of cork being what it is today, the ritual of tasting a wine before serving is for the enjoyment of the wine only."

The effective elimination of cork



Winemakers are returning to using cork for their stoppers because it is a more sustainable product and consumers prefer it

taint has led to popular brands, such as 19 Crimes and JP Chenet, returning to cork. Big bottling plants in the UK have also been investing heavily in new equipment to switch back to cork — even for lower-priced wine ranges.

Broadland Drinks, for example, is installing a new corking machine at their wine-packing facility in Norfolk and Encirc Beverages is said to be setting up a corking line at its site in Cheshire that will be ready for wine production in the next couple of months.

Rankin said winemakers were returning to cork because research showed consumers preferred it but also because it was a more sustainable product. "Continued demand for cork prevents desertification across the Iberian Peninsula [the location of most cork oak forests]. These forests — which cover 2.1 million hectares of land around the western Mediterranean — are also a global biodiversity hotspot. And for each tonne of cork that is produced some 73 tonnes of carbon dioxide is sequestered. Natural cork is biodegradable as well."

So if you use a corkscrew to open a bottle of wine this evening and it tastes great, raise a glass to science.

Chained monkeys 'harvesting coconuts'

Rhys Blakely Science Correspondent

Supermarkets are being urged to stop selling coconut milk from Thailand because farmers in the country are still using "enslaved monkeys" kept in horrific conditions to harvest it.

Thailand is one of the world's largest exporters of coconut milk, which has grown in popularity in the West because of demand from vegans and others seeking dairy alternatives.

Animal rights campaigners allege that thousands of endangered pigtail macaque monkeys are used to pick the coconuts, having either been bred in captivity or snatched from the wild while young.

According to Peta (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), its investigations have uncovered evidence of the monkeys being chained, whipped and forced to spend long hours picking heavy coconuts — an unnatural behaviour. It says the mon-



The monkeys were being snatched from the wild by farmers, Peta said

keys' sharp front teeth are often pulled out to stop them biting their trainers and that a lack of social contact harms animals that should live in family groups.

Tesco, Sainsbury's, Waitrose, Marks & Spencer and Morrisons sell tinned coconut milk from Thailand. Peta alleges that it is impossible to

guarantee these products have not involved monkeys.

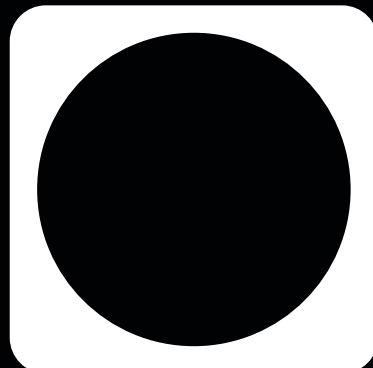
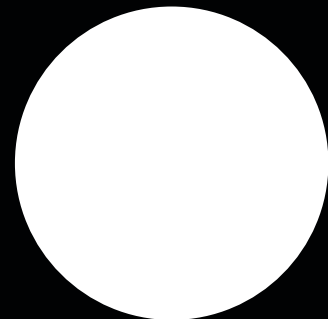
A new certification scheme has been introduced by the Thai government, whereby farms can apply for "monkey-free plus" status. However, it is in its early stages.

Sophie De Salis, of the British Retail Consortium, which represents supermarkets, said it was "engaging with the Thai government to address concerns over monkey labour" and supports monkey-free certification.

Waitrose said: "We fully support Peta's goal to end the use of monkey labour, and have strict measures in place, to make sure it isn't used in our supply chain."

Tesco said its own-brand coconut milk and coconut water did not use monkey labour in its production.

Sainsbury's and Morrisons said they were aligned with the BRC statement. Marks & Spencer was approached for comment.



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