

Historic Harvest

STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS, GET A FIRSTHAND LOOK AT THE REGENERATIVE BENEFITS OF CORK TREES by Randy Caparoso

IN MAY, cork trees were harvested on the campus of the University of California, Davis, for the first time in more than 30 years. The demonstration, conducted by Cork Supply, was for the benefit of students in the school's renowned viticulture and enology department, established in 1880. Cork Supply, founded in Northern California in 1981, is one of the world's largest suppliers of premium wine corks, operating plants in Benicia, California, as well as Portugal, South Africa, Australia, Argentina, and China.

This memorable demonstration did come with a disclaimer: Students learned that the bark from the two campus trees stripped by the Cork Supply experts in the traditional European fashion—using hand axes—did not quite meet the quality standards of the wine cork industry despite the fact that both trees were authentic cork species (belonging to the oak family *Quercus suber*) and over 80 years old.

"Cork quality is always measured by density, porosity, and tissue color," explained Frederico Mayer, Cork Supply's purchasing director of raw material. "The Davis trees are excellent, extremely healthy, planted back in 1941. However, this is the first time [these particular trees] were ever harvested. In Portugal, trees are usually harvested for the first time after 25 years, yielding what we call 'virgin cork.' After that, the outer bark regrows and is harvested once every nine years. It is not usually until the third harvest, when a tree is at least 38 years old, that the bark meets the quality necessary for use as bottle closures. The lifespan of cork trees is naturally about 200 years, and cork forests in Portugal are continuously replanted."

Emily Griswold, director of GATEways Horticulture and Teaching Gardens at UC Davis, provided fascinating insights into the cork trees growing on campus:



Cork Supply purchasing director of raw material Frederico Mayer, center, with colleagues Joao Ferreira and Carlos Ferreira at a University of California, Davis, demonstration of a cork tree harvest.

"[The cork oak's] natural habitat is in Mediterranean climate zones, which perfectly describes most of California. It's a little-known fact, but there are over 500 cork trees planted here in Davis. Why? One, for academic reasons. Two, because at one point, during World War II, it was thought that cork was needed for strategic defense purposes. Once the war ended, though, and the cork industry in Europe started up again, a California cork industry never got off the ground. Besides, we never had the expertise that they had in Europe, where the industry was already over 200 years old."

With cork forests still covering more than 8% of its total area, Portugal supplies over half of the world's cork material (there are also cork industries in Southern France, Spain, Sardinia, and North Africa). The trees are a protected species, and their harvests are rigorously legislated and regulated. It is precisely because of the naturally sustainable and biodegradable qualities of the material, according to Napa Green executive director Anna

Brittain, "that cork, more than ever, is in demand by the wine industry. It is net carbon negative and fulfills the social equity goals of sustainability. The laborers who do the hand work in the protected forests have been doing it for generations and are among the highest paid in Europe. The Portuguese industry alone supports over 20,000 workers."

"Only about 15% of cork bark harvests goes to the wine industry, although wine cork accounts for over 66% of the revenue," added Mayer in reference to Cork Supply, which recently launched Legacy, a natural cork closure carrying an industry-first oxygen-transfer-rate consistency guarantee. "The rest goes to building supplies or use in recyclable products such as shoes, purses, and paper. Not only does cork make the best bottle closure there is, it is a historically and culturally significant product because of how it is grown, and [it] contributes to the regenerative and sustainable goals that are more important than ever to the entire wine industry." ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF CORK SUPPLY