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WINE INDUSTRY BUSINESS JOURNAL: Italian cork maker to double size of Sonoma facility

by [Jeff Quackenbush](#)
Staff Reporter

SONOMA – Italy's largest producer of natural cork wine bottle stoppers is planning to double the size of its North American distribution hub to have more room for quality control and increase efficiency.

Ganau America, a subsidiary of family-owned Sugherificio Ganau S.p.A. of Sardinia, purchased 2.8 acres of land in late May and plans to build a 40,000-square-foot facility about a half-mile away from its current location at 21750 Eighth St. E. The new location is in Carneros Business Park, a 53-acre newly approved development located just north of the intersection of Eighth Street East and Highway 121.

The goal is to open the estimated \$5 million facility in early 2010. Del Starret Architect of Santa Rosa is designing the project.

If the county of Sonoma approves the project proposal, the new location would have four times more laboratory space than the current facility. Winemakers often use such labs to test for problem bales of corks, according to Mariella Ganau, president of Ganau America.

"In Napa and Sonoma counties, many winemakers want to do their own evaluations in our facility," said Ms. Ganau, 30. "So it made sense to accommodate winemakers who want to do their own tasting."

Such testing, including the soaking of stoppers in wine, hot water or vodka for 24 hours, has become more rigorous in the past decade as some winemakers have looked askance at natural cork closures amid publicity that fingered such stoppers as the culprit for "tainting" wine, especially delicate white varietals.

Such attention to the issue has led to the rise of alternative closures and a shift among natural cork stopper makers toward vertical integration from tree to delivered bale as well as development of cutting-edge sanitation for the cork bark as early in the production process as possible.

In the mid-1990s, Ganau adopted a high-temperature steam system to battle TCA, which is a mold-related chemical compound often blamed for wine taint. A decade later, the company acquired autoclaves large enough to clean whole slabs of cork bark, allowing for use of high-temperature water to remove contaminants without boiling the wood.

Ganau set up its distributorship in Sonoma in 2003 with the acquisition of Italcork, a cork

importer in which Ganau had part ownership. Italcork started in 1991 and expanded to the location currently occupied by Ganau America in early 2003.

The new facility would allow throughput of corks to increase 20 percent right away and offer additional expansion opportunities, according to Ms. Ganau. Each year about 80 million corks leave Ganau America's facility south of Napa, representing 17 percent of Ganau's global sales. The facility firebrands, lubricates, sorts and samples the stoppers before shipping them to customers.

The stoppers are produced at the main plant in Italy. In 2001, the parent Ganau company opened a facility in France to make stoppers for sparkling wine. Earlier this year, Ganau opened a plant in Portugal to produce cork pieces and discs, which are sent to the Sardinian plant for forming technical corks, which have agglomerate cork between one or two discs of solid cork on each end.

Rhonda Deringer, Jim Sartain and Mike Flitner of Keegan & Coppin/Oncor International brokered the land sale May 28.

For more information, call 707-939- or visit www.ganauamerica.com.