

A Spring in Their Steps

One company's quest to turn old wine corks into new flooring BY PETER BRONSKI

A FEW YEARS AGO, when Stephen Yemm and his wife set out to build a bigger house for their growing family and home-based business in Marquand, Miss., an architect recommended cork flooring for some areas of the home. Yemm immediately thought of using wine corks for his new floor. "I've always been saving them, but never knew what to do with them," he says. After all, there's a limit to how many cork bulletin boards one person can make—or use.

But while wine cork recycling programs are common abroad, Yemm couldn't find a single one in the U.S. The stage was set for his company, Yemm & Hart Limited, to bring the trend to this country.

Y&H started out in 1981 making office furniture; eight years later, Yemm took a risk and pushed his company in a new direction, making construction materials out of recycled content—old rubber tires, detergent bottles, milk jugs, and the like. His grand experiment in wine cork recycling started in 2004.

Natural cork wine stoppers are made from the bark of the Cork Oak tree (*Quercus suber*), a native of the Mediterranean region and one of the best examples of sustainable agro-forestry. Once a tree reaches 25 years of age, the cork can be harvested while leaving the tree standing, alive and intact. The cork can then be harvested again every nine years thereafter over the course of the tree's 200-year-plus lifespan.

When making wine stoppers, whole natural

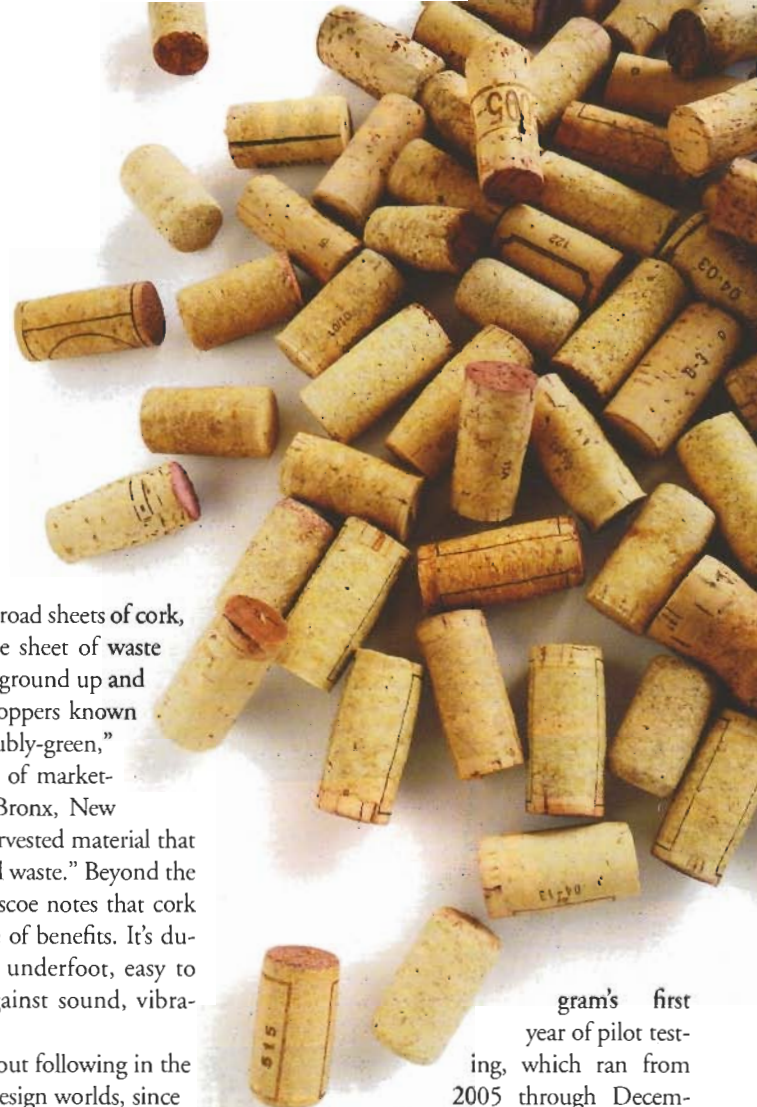
corks are punched out of broad sheets of cork, leaving a Swiss cheese-like sheet of waste material which, in turn, is ground up and pressed into even more stoppers known as technical corks. "It's doubly-green," says Jennifer Biscoe, head of marketing for Globus Cork in Bronx, New York. "It's a sustainably harvested material that uses its own post-industrial waste." Beyond the reuse of wine stoppers, Biscoe notes that cork flooring has its own range of benefits. It's durable, antimicrobial, soft underfoot, easy to clean, and it insulates against sound, vibration, and temperature.

Cork flooring has a devout following in the architecture and interior design worlds, since it can help buildings earn certification in the LEED program, which awards points for both recycled-content materials and rapidly renewable materials (flooring made from old wine corks meets both criteria).

Yemm draws his inspiration from recycling programs abroad, in which corks are often collected, curiously enough, by young girls. In Australia, a group called Guides—the Down-Under equivalent of the Girl Scouts of America—have been collecting wine corks for more than a decade, sending more than 90 million corks (weighing some 9,800 tons) to ACL Comcork, the world's largest wine-cork recycling plant. In Canada, the Ontario Girl Guides operate a similar program called Bag-A-Cork. In the pro-

gram's first year of pilot testing, which ran from 2005 through December 2006, the group diverted 1.6 million cork stoppers from landfills, sending more than five tons of cork to the Ontario office of Jelinek Cork Group, one of the oldest continually-active cork companies in the world.

Y&H issued a call for donations of cork wine stoppers on its website, which immediately caught the attention of designers, architects, and people doing Internet searches for wine cork recycling. The first donations trickled in during 2004; predictably, much of the cork came from restaurants and wineries. Soon, corks began arriving from across the country, their sources as diverse as individual wine drinkers: Magazine offices, churches, ar-



WINE CORK FACTS

⦿ During the 17th century, the French monk Dom Pérignon—best known for his invention of Champagne—was one of the first to start using natural cork as a wine stopper.

⦿ According to the Cork Quality Council, Portugal and Spain generate 84 percent of the

world's cork supply, producing 52 percent and 32 percent, respectively.

⦿ The world's first cork-stopper factory opened in 1750 in Anguine, Spain.

⦿ An average cork oak tree reaches its prime at 80 years old,

and produces about 440 pounds per harvest, or enough cork to make about 25,000 natural wine cork stoppers.

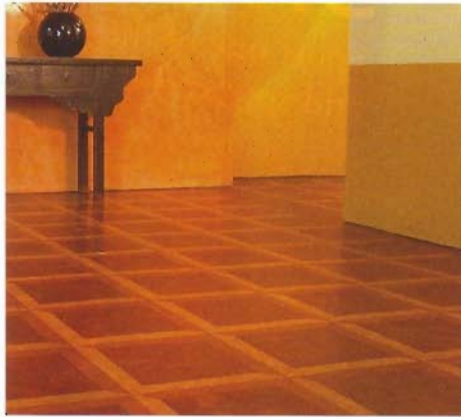
⦿ In Portugal, the cork oak is a protected species—it is illegal to cut one down.

⦿ The Whistler Tree, in Portugal,

is the most productive cork oak on record. Nearly 220 years old, it is 45 feet tall and its trunk has a 15-foot circumference. First harvested in 1820, it currently yields more than one ton of raw cork per harvest. That's enough to make 100,000 wine bottle stoppers.

chitecture and law firms, industrial manufacturers—even Barneys New York—all donated.

By March 2007, Y&H had accumulated 1,200 pounds of cork material. Along the way, Yemm and his colleagues had already begun experimenting with different methods of processing cork. They acquired 40 pounds of cork that had been granulated in Europe (presently it's difficult to find U.S. companies that do this), and, using a polyurethane binder, pressed it into a cube that could be sliced into thin sheets for flooring. But Yemm wasn't content to stop there. "You might spot a little stain in the cork from red wine here or there," he says, "but we wanted to do something more exotic to acknowledge the cork's origins in wine bottles." Phase II of Yemm's experiment was to dump the whole corks they'd collected (thus preserving their stained ends) into a hopper, along with granulated cork to fill in the gaps, and press the material into blocks that, when sliced, resemble a sliced Jell-O mold filled with fruit: cross-sections of wine-stained cork



Flooring made from cork is durable and easy to clean. Like carpet, it also absorbs sound—and it doesn't get too hot or too cold.

embedded in a natural cork medium.

The project caught the attention of Mithun, a Seattle-based architecture firm specializing in sustainable design. "Cork is such a wonderful material. It's a shame to just throw it away," says Tyra Sorensen, an associate architect there. "With our emphasis on sustainability, we're always looking to see if there's a way we can do

better, whether with a small recycling gesture, or with a bigger gesture like solar panels or storm water catchments. Was there something better we could be doing with our corks?"

Y&H's recycling program was the answer. Sorensen started an office- and client-wide recycling effort, and Mithun made its first donation in October 2006. Since then, the company has sent in more than 74 pounds of cork, the equivalent of nearly 10,000 wine bottle stoppers.

Once Y&H starts manufacturing cork flooring on a commercial scale, Mithun hopes to use the products in its work with clients. In a way, it's the ultimate closed-loop system—the same champagne cork popped to celebrate a deal with a client becomes part of the floor of the client's project. And with the cork donations coming in fast and furious, that day may not be far off. "There's real passion behind this project," says Yemm. "There are wine drinkers everywhere, but we didn't realize just how much support there truly is." ☺

*Our recipe:
find natural, tasty ingredients and don't mess them up.*

