

The Rod Maker's Cork Grade Scale

Finally, a grading system with a representative standard behind it!

If you wanted to buy the very best cork rings available, would grade would you buy? Flor? Special? AAAA? Which is the highest grade? No doubt, you don't really know. Neither do I, because there is no industry standard for either cork grading or labeling. One dealer may call his best grade Flor, while another calls his AAA. And even when you happen upon two that both use the same grade name for their very best cork, there is only a slim chance that any cork bought from both and under the same grade name will possess the same quality. Plus, the really fantastic "Flor" rings you bought from your dealer last time may be an entirely different level of quality the next time.

More Problems

Added to the problem of not having any industry standards for cork grade names or labeling, is the fact that no one really has any idea what any particular cork grade is supposed to look like. Just how clear does "Flor" cork have to be in order for a dealer to pronounce it as being "Flor" grade? How clear are "Special" or "AAA" rings?

So we've got distributors and dealers subjectively grading their own cork and applying grade names that have no link to any sort of published standard. It's no wonder that buying cork is such a frustrating and expensive gamble.

The Solution

Now if we had a published standard for cork grade names as well as actual photo guidelines of how clear any ring would have to be in order to attain a certain level, we'd be a lot better off. Such a standard set of guidelines backed by photo representation would eliminate confusion and greatly reduce, if not totally eliminate, the sad surprise that rod builders often get when their "Flor" grade cork arrives and turns out to be less than they expected.

So let's set a standard, right here and now. Let's also represent each grade with a photo that clearly illustrates just how clear any ring must be in order to fall into any of the various grades or categories.

The Rod Builder Cork Grade Scale

The "Rod Builder Cork Grade Rating System" is limited to just 3 basic grades, CG1 (Cork Grade #1), CG2 and CG3. The highest grade, CG1, will be 90% to 100% clear and free of pits and blemishes. Any imperfections that are present will be very small, not much larger than shirt pin diameter. When turned, the resulting grip may show some tan or brown blemishes, but none will be deep enough to require or even be likely to hold, any paste or filler. CG1 should be considered the very best cork available.

The next grade, CG2, is still a very good grade of cork, but will only be between 80% to 90% clear and any imperfections may be a little larger than those found on CG1 rings. When turned, any imperfections will be deep enough to hold paste or filler, but not so deep or so frequent that paste or filler is actually required in order to have a comfortable grip. CG2 should be considered the all-around cork grade for good quality rod grips and handles. Do not consider it sub-standard as it represents the majority of what is considered high quality cork these days.

The final grade of cork is CG3. It lumps together everything else in the world of cork rings - all those rings that aren't good enough to be considered CG1 or CG2. Clarity is less than 80% and the imperfections may, in fact, be quite large compared to the two higher grades. When turned, some of these imperfections may be large enough to cause slight discomfort in the hand. They will certainly be noticeable in the finished grip. In order to obtain a very nice looking grip with CG3 cork, some type of filler or paste will almost certainly be required.

In the photographic standard, I have included 6 rings of each cork grade. Notice that some slight variances with each grade do occur. But also note that the best and worst of each grade represents only a slight difference. The only exception will be among CG3 rings, which represent all rings that fail to qualify as either CG1 or CG2. Thus, CG3 rings will represent a wider quality range than either of the first two, encompassing everything up to, but *not* including CG1 or CG2 grades.

Variations

Do keep in mind that cork, being a natural material, varies from ring to ring. A customer ordering a bag of 100 CG1 rings should fully expect the quality of the rings to vary from one to another. Still, they should all fall within the standards set and the range is narrow enough that wide variations in quality within the same grade shouldn't occur. There will always be a slight grey area, of course, as one grade begins to slip into the next. In other words, when does a CG1 become a CG2 ring? Out of 100 rings, you may find a handful of what you consider to be CG2 rings in your bag of CG1 rings. But it should be a close call. Because cork grading is done by human hands and eyes it still requires some amount of subjective judgment. However, with a photographic scale to go by, rings shouldn't fall off the mark by much if the person doing the grading is even remotely competent.

How To Use It

Now if you pick up your phone tomorrow morning and ask your dealer to send you some CG1 cork rings, he won't likely know what you're talking about. And even if he does, he is under no obligation to adopt nor conform to any such cork grading system. Still, the system is completely useful to you. If he can't tell you just how clear his "Flor" or "AAA" cork is, just fax or email him a copy of the Rod Maker's Cork Grade Scale photo standard and ask him which of these three grades is closest to what he calls "Flor" or any of his other grades. It's a simple matter for him to flip 3 or 4 rings out on his counter and compare their faces to those in the photo standard. If he won't do it, you may wish to buy elsewhere.

Cork is Cork

Like any new system that defines standards and then uses a relative and objective scale to measure them, the Rod Maker's Cork Grade Scale is accurate and it is very much correct. But it is not intended to force anyone to adopt it nor to use it in their own business. Most likely, it would be advantageous to do so, but we can all understand why many distributors and dealers would prefer not to be held to any definite cork grading scale. Still, that has no effect on how the useful the system can be to you. With at least one published standard in place now, we can all relate cork ring clarity to this scale and at least require our cork dealers to let us know how their own cork grades relate to this published, visible standard. 

