

Let's do something different this issue and talk about wine barrels. I have visited hundreds of wineries in my travels and never paid much attention to the ever-present wine barrels. I guess that I took them for granted as something to contain wine while it aged. Shame on me! Last July, when I was in Oregon, I met the winemaker at Shea Vineyards. His name is Drew Volt. Drew is highly respected in his trade as a winemaker. After showing me around the vineyard and the winery, we got into a discussion (it was more like a one-way student/pupil lecture) about wine barrels. What an eye-opener. I was soon listening and learning that a wine barrel is not just a series of staves held together by metal strapping. Rather it is container manufactured to very tight specifications for the wood, the inside lining, the toasting (yes, toasting), and steel strapping.

Looking further we find that wine barrels are made from oak. Oak from the United States is harvested from Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin and the Eastern-most Mid-Atlantic states. Oak from France is harvested from several forest preserves; the most popular being Allier, Limousin, Nevers, Tronçais, and Vosges. What we have here is professional forestry management of oak trees that are subjected to controlled growth and not harvested until they are 80-120 years of age. The age gives the trees a tighter grain. The yield per tree is approximately two barrels.

What does Oak do to wine? In her book "The Wine Bible," Karen MacNeil sums it up quite well when she states that without Oak we would have no wine. Wine barrels could be constructed from Pine, Maple, Cherry, or anything else that the forest has to offer. These alternative woods simply would not enhance the flavor of wine the way that Oak does. Using Oak for hundreds of years has proven that it is the best storage environment for wine. Oak has the ability to literally transform wine, to give it depth, complexity and intensity.

Early experiments with American Oak (and that of many other countries) were not very successful; the influence that the barrel had on the taste of the wine was too great. At first it was thought that the problem was the wood itself. Now we know that the problem was the way the wood was prepared and the way the barrel was constructed. As coopers began to use traditional French barrel-making techniques on foreign Oak, the results improved dramatically. Most notable were the way that the staves were prepared and the seasoning of the wood. The French Coopers always let the wood air-dry for 24 months to attain proper seasoning. The American Coopers were used to making whiskey barrels and therefore the wood was kiln-dried. The last major technique that came from the French was the splitting of the Oak rather than sawing. This actually produced a subtle effect on the wine.

Once the French Oak barrel construction techniques were applied to Oak from other countries, the results improved substantially. It is now common to find American Oak as well as Oak from other countries including Hungary in the construction of barrels. American Oak may be less expensive than Oak from other countries and the results may even be similar. However, no one can deny that the French did set the standard for construction of barrels.

Now for the Toast – and this is important! During assembly of the wine barrel a step takes place where the partially assembled barrel is placed over a small wood fire. The inside of the barrel is toasted Light, Medium, or Heavy. It all depends on the grape variety and the style of wine that is to be produced. The decision is entirely in the hands of the winemaker. The decision is also based upon YEARS of experience. In the discussion mentioned above in the first paragraph, Mr. Volt started with just a few barrels of selected ranges of toast. When he was satisfied that the wine – in this case Pinot Noir – will turn out as anticipated, he then placed an order for barrels needed for the year. There is also a watch on economy. Barrels are outrageously expensive. They can run as high as \$900 per copy.

The final point that was made by Drew was NEUTRALITY. New barrels impart more flavors to the wine than previously used barrels. Keeping track of barrels and the number of times that they are used is important. By the time a barrel is five years old it is virtually neutral as far as its influence on wine is concerned. Depending upon its overall condition, it is either reconditioned or sold for various other uses. Flowerpot anyone?

Cheers!

Next stop is Napa.

Winespeak

Cooperage is a thriving industry. It exists, for our discussion, in the red wine arena. Most white wines will be aged and stored in stainless steel tanks. Most of the mid to high end red wines will be aged and stored in oak barrels. It is fascinating to think that in our age of high tech, it is still a wooden barrel that contains the wine and stores and ages the wine sometimes in excess of 16 months. This scenario tells me that serious cash is tied up for long periods of time. Evidently it is worth it; and helps me to understand why my bottle of OPUS ONE costs \$150.

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