

I have visited hundreds of wineries in my travels and never paid much attention to the ever-present wine barrels or where they were placed. Little did I know! In most cases, the wine barrels were positioned exactly where they were supposed to be. I learned this small but important fact from the winemaker at Shea Vineyards in Oregon. His name is Drew Volt and he is highly respected in his chosen vocation.

Drew gave me a detailed tour of the winery, and afterwards we got into a discussion about wine barrels. (This was actually more like a teacher/pupil lecture.) What an eye-opener! I soon learned that a wine barrel is not just a container made from oak and held together by a few metal straps. Rather, it is a complex creation manufactured to very tight specifications – including the wood, the inside lining, the toasting (yes, toasting) and steel strapping. A new wine barrel, ready to ship to a winery, can run as high as \$900-plus. More on cost later.

Looking further into the forest, we find that wine barrels are made from oak. Oak from the United States is harvested from Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin and from the eastern most Mid-Atlantic states. Oak from France is harvested from several forest preserves, the most popular being Allier, Limousin, Nevers, Tronçais and Vosages. 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. Their 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 so that there is no misunderstanding. She clearly states that without oak there would be 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. Over hundreds of years, oak has proven to be the best storage environment for wine. Oak possesses 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 of the barrel on the taste of the wine was overwhelming. At first it was thought that the problem was the wood itself. Additional research revealed that it was the way the wood was prepared and the way that the barrel was constructed. As coopers began to use

traditional French barrel-making techniques on foreign oak, the results improved dramatically. Most notable was 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 achieve proper seasoning. The American Coopers were used to making whiskey barrels and therefore the wood was kiln dried. After some experimentation, the Americans got it right and wine and whiskey were given their proper place in the production of barrels.

Once the French oak barrel construction techniques were applied to oak from other countries, results improved substantially. It is now common to find American oak, as well as oak from other countries, including Hungary, used in the making of barrels. But the bottom line is that the French set the standard for the construction of wine barrels.

Now for the toast - and this is important. During assembly of the wine barrels a procedure takes place during which the partially assembled barrels are placed over a wood fire. The inside of the barrels are toasted LIGHT, MEDIUM, or HEAVY. The degree of toasting depends upon the grape variety and the style of wine that is to be produced. The decision for the level of toasting is entirely in the hands of the winemaker. He/she is going to rely upon the many years of experience needed for a decision of this magnitude. In the discussion mentioned 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, was going to turn out as anticipated, he then placed an order for the year.

The final point Drew discussed was NEUTRALITY. New barrels impart more flavors to the wine than previously used barrels. Keeping track of the number of times that each barrel is used is important because after about five years of use, a barrel becomes neutral as far as influencing the flavor of the wine is concerned. At the end of the fifth year a barrel is assessed for its condition. Depending upon those findings, it is either reconditioned or sold for other uses.

Flowerpot anyone?

Winespeak

Cooperage is a thriving industry. Both red and white wines are aged in this type of container. It's fascinating to think that in our age of Hi-Tech it is still a wooden barrel that's used to store and

properly age the wine that we drink. The scenario also suggests that serious cash is tied up for long periods of time, which may be one of the reasons why my bottle of OPUS ONE costs \$150.