

{ notes from the winemaker }

by Kate Nowell-Smith



# Why Barrels Still Matter

THE JUDICIOUS USE  
OF OAK WILL ALWAYS  
BE IN STYLE

*The Forêt de Tronçais in central France is one of the world's most renowned oak forests.*

**WINE PRODUCERS ORIGINALLY** used traditional 59-gallon oak barriques because they were the lightest, cheapest, and least breakable storage and transportation vessels available. In the last century, however, they became a stylistic choice, used for their contribution to a wine's character—some would say to a fault: Many critics now complain of overoaking while environmentalists decry the cutting down of trees. So, with all of this talk about moving away from barrels, why do many winemakers—myself included—still choose to work with them?

First, it bears mentioning that today's fresh, fruit-forward wines are often all the better for not spending time in oak. Large concrete tanks can be perfect for unfussy reds, while smaller concrete eggs can lend a creamy texture to whites thanks to the continued lees suspension that their shape encourages. And in the spirit of "everything old is new again," orange wines are often kept in amphorae, which predate barrels.

Meanwhile, if it's simply a matter of imparting a bit of oak character to an everyday wine, oak chips can be tossed into stainless-steel tanks for a fraction of the cost. However, when the goal is a complex, ageworthy, nuanced wine, then barriques,

with their specific surface-to-volume ratio, become critical. And there is enormous diversity among them: The factors that determine what a particular barrel can offer a wine include the species of oak and its origin; the seasoning; the thickness of the staves; the application of wet or dry heat to bend those staves; the toast level; and the barrel's age.

Winemakers turn to different coopers according to their needs, which go well beyond their desire to add a hint of almond nougat versus vanilla to a Chardonnay (although that also matters). Is the goal, for example, to enhance color stability in a Pinot Noir prone to pigment fallout? Oak tannins form long, stable chains with the wine's anthocyanins, keeping these color-giving molecules in suspension. What about when something is needed to soften the tannins in a grippy Cabernet Sauvignon? Those same chains, in combination with barrels' slow oxygen ingress, do exactly that. There is also nothing like new oak to balance out the green notes in a Cab Franc, and if one wants to discourage reduction in Syrah, a barrel is indispensable. Finally, because of the evaporative loss that comes with oak, winemakers can even use it to fine-tune a wine's alcohol content.

Understanding how each type of barrel can influence their wine is an important part of a winemaker's job. Cooperages vary not only in terms of specifications but also in terms of consistency. In learning this the hard way, I have had to give up on certain makers because their barrels, while sometimes wonderful, are not reliable. Large wineries can blend out the effects of an overly toasted or tannic barrel on a wine, but smaller producers faced with this dilemma have nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide.

Winemakers are increasingly looking for ways to minimize their carbon footprint, which means calling into question each input in the winemaking process. The good news is that many of Europe's finest oak forests actually owe their survival through the centuries to the wine industry, which is so important to France that the vast majority are carefully protected with the help of organizations like the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification.

For oak-aged wines, I would argue that after pick date, choice of cooper, toast level, and barrel age are the most important decisions facing a winemaker. Watch this space for further exploration of these topics. **SJ**

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