

SEVENTH ANNUAL BARREL ISSUE

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Assuring the quality and repeatability of unique toasting profiles, a cooper (left) at Missouri Cooperage in Lebanon Mo., monitors the toasting process by time and temperature.

Couture Comes to Cooperage

More coopers willing to tailor oak to winemaker specifications

By Kerry Kirkham

Tough market conditions for wineries have led coopers to be innovative when dealing with buyer price resistance during this flat barrel economy. Coopers are distinguishing themselves from competitors by featuring barrel-customization options tailored to their clients' specific wine programs. From the coopers' points of view, custom options help keep flat barrel prices from further decline by offering added value and a higher level of customer care without additional charge. It's like buying an individually tailored suit for an off-the-rack price.

This is a stark contrast from an era when winemakers had fewer custom options—and, in some cases, had to buy multiple barrels to reach a minimum purchase requirement. Thankfully minimums are largely a thing of the past, and total customization is becoming more common. For winemakers with specific style goals, this is truly the ideal market.

Toast of the town

Winemakers can now select from myriad toast choices far beyond good ol' medium toast and medium toast-plus. Jason Stout, global sales director for Cooperages 1912 in Napa, Calif., represents both T.W.

Boswell and World Cooperage, which, he mentioned, has a dizzying array of 111 toast profiles. Some of these profiles can be explored on the World Cooperage website by clicking the "barrel profiling" option. Toasting profiles are categorized by grape variety and separated into French and American oak. For winemakers concerned with repeatability, profiles are tracked and charted by toasting duration and temperature. Some profiles also have detailed sensory descriptors.

Hybrid trend

Francois Peltreanu-Villeneuve of Seguin Moreau Napa Cooperage reported, "By

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far, the most common custom request is American body with French heads." When asked if this request is driven by cost savings or style, he said that it is all style-based.

"More winemakers are responding to consumer demands that respect the fruit," he said.

Standard toasting profiles range from medium to medium-plus or heavy toast for American oak, and the heads are toasted or not, depending on the winemaker's style.

According to Peltreau-Villeneuve, "Winemakers wait until after harvest to see what their juice tastes like before they decide on a toasting profile." Untoasted French oak heads will contribute more oak tannins. Toasted heads lessen the structural contributions of oak tannins, imparting more toast flavor qualities to the wine.

Recently, Seguin Moreau received a 60-barrel order for heavy toast American oak bodies with heavy toast Russian oak heads. Peltreau-Villeneuve said that Russian oak "adds freshness to the wine." With a turnaround time of one day at the cooperage, the Napa-based winemaker could potentially rack into his custom hybrid barrels within 48 hours.



Trust Cooperage's Szigetvar oak seasoning yard in Hungary, where wood is air dried for two to three years.

Tailored wood

Mel Knox, a veteran barrel broker based in San Francisco, Calif., has many customers who buy wood futures in exchange for the ability to dictate how the staves are seasoned and for how long. The industry standard for naturally seasoned, air-dried wood aging ranges from 30 to 36 months. However, for styles requiring softer wood tannins, some clients request 40 months. Since there isn't a high demand for wood aged this long, an initial investment is required.

Knox said that 5,000-case Rhys Vineyards of San Carlos, Calif., "gets four-year

air-dry from Francois Freres by buying the wood in advance.

"We have many customers who buy their wood in advance. Next to species, air-drying is the most important thing to consider in overall wood quality. This is empirically understood by coopers," Knox said.

Rhys Vineyards purchases uncoopered stave wood that has been air-dried for four full years in Burgundy. According to the winery's website, barrel decisions are made with two goals in mind: "very consistent barrels year after year, and wines that are differentiated entirely by the vineyard and not by the barrel. The resulting barrels are extremely gentle and help raise our wine with pure fruit rather than noticeable oak flavor."

Jeff Brinkman, winemaker at Rhys, remarked that there are no cost savings in this approach; it is practiced purely for style.

"There are less obvious oak influences, providing mid-palate texture and lift for the fruit. It's tough nowadays, but we put our order in four years in advance, and we pay for a percentage up front at the current euro rate and pay a cooperage fee at the time of cooperage." Brinkman feels that if more four-year aged wood were readily available, it would be more popular. **W&V**

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