

WINES & VINES

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The Basics of Barrel Selection

Advice from a winemaker about matching barrels and wines

by Jeff Cohn



Jeff Cohn, winemaker for JC Cellars, prides himself on his extensive barrel collection, but he cautions newcomers to experiment a little at a time.

HIGHLIGHTS

- A veteran California winemaker describes the major options in wine barrel selection for beginning winemakers.

- Tasting widely and inquiring about the types of oak used is essential research, along with knowing the traditional barrel/variety pairings.
- Be aware of trends in barrels, including less emphasis on the wood's origin and more on the cooper's style.
- Follow your own instincts rather than simply copying another winery's approach.

I've always had a great fascination with the way a barrel can influence the flavor and complexity of wine. Your barrel program is just one of the many components you have to piece together as you go about creating your masterpiece, and knowing how to choose the right barrel will get you that much closer to reaching your ultimate goal.

Research

The first order of business is to start doing some research, and a tremendous number of options are available to you as a winemaker. Taste other people's wines—both out of barrels and out of bottles. Try to get a feel for what you like and do not like about particular wines. Review styles that are well perceived in the industry, even if they are not to your particular liking, and do some research into these wineries. Even if you don't care for something, you need to know why in order to lead your wine in a different direction.

It may also be a good idea to call different cooperages. As a prospective buyer, a representative will be able to help you review what barrels are available, which are recommended for different types of wine, and may even be able to tell you what specific barrel a given winery is using.

Tradition

As you go about your research, you'll likely discover that the barrels used in the creation of specific wines have a lot to do with tradition. Here are a few regions and examples of their traditional pairings:

- Northern Rhône—Burgundy barrels
- Southern Rhône—Burgundy barrels/larger format
- Burgundy—Burgundy
- Bordeaux—Bordeaux
- Australia—American barrels, Bordeaux shape/hogsheads

Tradition has a lot to do with winemaking. Winemakers have spent centuries discovering just how to impart a specific flavor profile and texture to a wine, and they have found the best barrels to use in the process. By studying tradition, you find a good starting point from which to envision how a particular barrel will affect a final product.

Now it's time to examine what variables will affect the different flavors, textures and aromatic

profiles of your finished wine.

Types of wood

By now you may be wondering: Is there anything out there besides French and American oak? Of course there is. You have Hungarian, Russian and Chinese barrels, to name a few more. Woods that are not oak—such as acacia, redwood and juniper—are beginning to make their way into barrel-making as well.

In terms of oak, it can get even more specific. Several types of American oak are used; Pennsylvania, Missouri, Virginia, Minnesota and Oregon are a few sources.

All of these options are available to help you achieve the complexity and depth you want in your wine, although the sheer number of options can be overwhelming. My suggestion would be to not overly experiment, but try a little here and a little there, until you feel comfortable with what your gut instinct can contribute. After you become familiar with the different flavors wood can impart, a little bit of instinct can go a long way.

Barrel size and shape

Is the wine fruit driven, structure driven or earthtone driven? These are the sorts of questions you should continue asking yourself throughout the entire selection process. These variables guide all of your decision making, including the size and shape of the barrel.

A larger barrel will age wine at a slower pace, because there is a smaller wood-to-wine ratio, and certain wines, such as Grenache, show better in these barrels. This wine is known to be more oxidative; larger barrels are more protective of this trait and help retain the fruit-forward aspect of this varietal. I have also have seen large formats used frequently with more fruit-driven Zinfandels; 300-, 350-, 400- and 500-liter barrels are great sizes to work with.

But again, consider your goals. Perhaps you want to age something in a smaller, 60-gallon (225-liter) barrel to really get your ferment in contact with as much wood as possible, with the goal of imparting maximum flavor to the final product.

Again, do your research. Find out what traditionally shows well in certain size barrels, do some tastings, and then let your instinct guide you. I occasionally use large barrels in conjunction with 60-gallon barrels to help add depth and complexity to my wines.

Concrete vessels

Although not a barrel, cement has started to become a viable option for many wineries, both for fermentation and storage. Cement fermentors are heavily used in the Southern Rhône.

The advantage of using a concrete vessel is that because concrete is porous, it allows the wine to breathe without imparting any wood flavor that may hide the minerality or flavor of the fruit you're working with. The oxidation of the wine (its interaction with the outside air) is what gives wine its lush texture and mouthfeel. A wine fermented in a steel vat will not interact with oxygen as freely, and therefore will have a very clean, light palate.

My experimentations with concrete seem to be an endless process. I have experience with the vertical oval concrete ‘egg’ tanks from the designer Marc Nomblot, and also the ‘pyramid’ and ‘hippo’ vessels from Vino Vessel Inc. These cement alternatives are still very new to me, but at this point I am thrilled with the outcomes and am planning to buy more of them in the future. (For more on concrete tanks, see *Inquiring Winemaker* on page 50.)

Toasting of barrels

By now you’ve explored all of the variables in buying barrels, right? Think again. It’s time to figure out how you’d like the inside of your barrel prepared. Toasting the inside is yet another way to add depth and complexity to your wine. It’s best to ask the cooperage you’re buying from what they recommend for the type of barrel you’re buying.

As always, find out what the traditional barrel preparation would be for the wine you’re creating, then explore options that go against the grain and build your intuition. For example, heavily toasted heads are not a very common match-up with Vicard barrels. Maybe it’s not the perfect match-up for your wine either, but for some of my Syrahs, it’s the perfect final puzzle piece to creating the wine exactly as I intend.

New oak

Using a new oak barrel, as opposed to a used one, helps impart the maximum amount of wood flavor to your wine. If money is no object, let’s go all out and over-oak the hell out of our wine! Many who know me will tell you I do like to use a lot of oak, and yes, it shows itself in my wine now and again, but that is intentional. It’s our house style. We have toned down certain lots in the past couple of years, but some wines still get the full dose of oak, and in my opinion they are much better for it.

Spend time measuring what works best for your wine and your budget. Even if you have all the money in the world, spend it wisely and start off slowly on what percent of new oak you need. For many of my new clients who have never had wine made from their vineyards before, I stick to using 20%-40% new oak during the fermentation process.

Purchasing barrels

The world is changing, and so are our barrel buying practices. We all know the economy has been in the dumper; the euro stinks, and all of us have accountants with a sixth sense for knowing if we’re even thinking about spending money on a new barrel.

Ordering barrels has changed a bit, as well. Many cooperages no longer offer choices of forests as they have in the past. (Yes, you could even select from what forest you wanted your oak.)

In my opinion this works better for the winemaker. Consistently ordering barrels made from the trees grown in the Nevers forest doesn’t mean that your wine will taste the same every time: Every tree is different.

Instead, cooperages are responding to diminishing supplies of wood and price increases by providing specific barrel styles as opposed to specific wood types. Between you and me, I would rather see and taste a barrel that has been developed by a master cooper for a specific style.

Consistently choosing a specific barrel type from a cooperage, as opposed to a specific type of wood, will ultimately provide you with more control and consistency in your wine.

I like to order barrels in January and February. This guarantees me the best price and ensures I will receive my barrels long before harvest. Each cooperage has its own monetary requirements, but if you're ordering from Europe, watch how the euro is fluctuating and get the best conversion rate possible.

Barrel selection as art

I have said over and over again throughout the course of this process: Don't be afraid of your instinct as a winemaker. Do some research and keep in mind what it is you're making: You cannot make a Chave Hermitage unless you have Chave's fruit source to work with.

Look at your fruit—its flavor, terroir, texture, sugars—and decide what you can make out of it. Likely you'll become confused, frustrated and ultimately beg for omnipotence or divine intervention. Just stir the pot a touch, try something new, and go against the grain if that's the path that is calling you. Life is too short to get stuck in the bunghole.

Jeff Cohn is owner and winemaker of JC Cellars in Oakland, Calif. Previously he served as winemaker at Rosenblum Cellars. To comment on this article, e-mail edit@winesandvines.com.

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415.453.9700 | Fax: 415.453.2517

info@winesandvines.com