

Designer Barrel Alternatives

Getting Past the Vanillin Catnip Technique

Curtis Phillips

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ONE OF MY PERSONAL pet peeves about oak in American winemaking is the confuscated heavy-handedness of it all. Too many wines rely on an superabundance of oak to cover a world of shortcomings without regard to any boundary between making wine and making oak tea. I spent a lot of my career as a corporate winemaker doing very interventionist and remedial winemaking, so it's not that I don't understand just how much winemaker has to intervene to turn indifferent grapes into something quaffable. Adding oak at the receiving hopper has been my go-to remedy for underripe grapes for decades. To my mind, however, if the first impression the consumer gets from your wine is the smell of the oak, then you have failed as a winemaker.

This has been on my mind as a number of increasingly sophisticated oak alternatives have come on the market. Two of these new oak alternatives caught my attention during this year's **Unified Wine and Grape Symposium**. The first is SC100 from Bois  France, and the second is CEnofirst Finisher. These are two fairly different products with the similar goal of increasing the perceived sweetness and mid-palate of wines.

I haven't had the chance to use either of these oak alternatives in my own winemaking so I'm not making any endorsements beyond my usual "that looks kind of cool and it might be worth checking out for yourself."

Cool Products from UWGS Honorable Mention

New Oak Alternatives

Several suppliers had new oak alternatives at Unified this year, including **The Barrel Mill, Bouchard Cooperages, Fine Northern Oak, Oak Solution Group, Seguin Moreau, Toneleria Nacional, Tonnellerie Radoux** and **Vivelys-Oenodev**. At the moment, perhaps the Bois  SC100 oak alternative from Vivelys-Oenodev is the one I find most interesting. SC100 seems to be all about the mid-palate texture (but that is probably due to my own biases as a winemaker). I strongly recommend that any winemaker run bench trials on all these rather than take my word in this particular case.

Vivelys - Bois  France SC100

Bois , a division of Vivelys, was showing off their new oak alternative which they have named SC100. My suspicion was that SC100 is produced by a combination of source-wood preselection combined with a fairly sophisticated level of control in the toasting process. Without stating details or exposing any proprietary information, Laurent Fargeton, Chef de Produit "Vin" at Vivelys, confirmed that the source wood used is selected to have a low content of eight aroma precursors. They also measure a like number of tannin compounds. The toasting process for SC100 is designed to minimize the production of oak aroma compounds from these eight precursors by controlling both the toasting temperature and time.

To my palate, the trials I've tasted of wines treated with SC100 seem to taste exactly how the PR blurb says they should. They were remarkable in the low-levels of perceived oak or woody characters and yet there were enormous changes to the texture and palate of the wine. SC100 was described to me as being designed to be minimally aromatic while increasing the perceived sweetness and the "fatness" on the mid-palate. I would like to taste more trials, especially double-blind trials, to eliminate the possibility that my palate was being governed by the power of suggestion.

Bois  SC100 is targeted at white wines, particularly Chardonnays, but I think that many ros  and quick-to-market red wines may well benefit from its use as well. It's at least worth getting some samples and running bench trials.



Seguin Moreau - CENOFIRST Finisher

At first glance, CENOFIRST Finisher Logs look a bit like a pressed fireplace log or an oversized wood-stove pellet. The latter is probably a better description since, to my layman's eye, the CENOFIRST looks to be composed simply of compressed oak dust. As the name might imply, CENOFIRST Finisher is designed to be used relatively late in the wine-making process—as late as a few weeks before bottling. Notable attributes of the CENOFIRST Finisher are that it is made from a blend of French and American oak and that it is toasted by using air convection toast. Air convection toast allows for a great deal of control during the toasting process, resulting a deeply penetrating toast because the temperature gradient can be much milder than from a radiant heat source.

The CENOFIRST Finisher 2 kg (4.4 lbs) logs would make measurement easy while essentially eliminating any oak-dust during dosing. Again, I would like to taste through a trial or two of wines treated with CENOFIRST Finisher.

CENOFIRST Finisher By SEGUIN MOREAU



I would expect a decrease in vegetal aromas and a similar broadening of the mid-palate in wines where this has been used.

As winemakers, we should approach oak alternatives, and traditional élevage for that matter, with a great deal more forethought and intention than is normally the case. Too often barrels or barrel-alternatives are thrown at wines without any real thought as to any actual purpose beyond “needs oak.” Why do wines “need oak”? What the heck are we hoping to accomplish? Are we making wine or oak tea? Does the winemaker have any idea about the wine he might be trying to make? If we're aging wine in oak, or putting oak in wine, have we given any thought as to what we are trying to accomplish?

I'm much less concerned about the particulars of any other winemaker's winemaking than I am concerned that any given winemaker is making the wine that they intended to. Are we adding oak because we vaguely feel like it needs more or are we adding oak because this particular wine would benefit from an increase in vanilla, coconut, and/or smoky aromas? Or mid-palate weight? Or color stability? Or the suppression of “green” aromas?

With both these products, I would start running bench trials on any wine in my cellar that would be helped by a little more texture in the mid-palate. I think the exact dosage needed will vary widely according to vintage, variety and winemaking style, but the overall utility of either or both of these oak products may prove to be well-nigh universal. [WBM](#)



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