Over a Barrel: Winemakers Swear Using Oak Is Tasteless

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By Roger Morris

The interesting conversation with Jeff Cole over lunch – about how he had a few years earlier experimented in his job as winemaker at Sullivan Vineyards in Napa Valley by doing something significantly different with a single barrel of Cabernet and how that had progressed to where he now did the same thing with all his serious reds – got me thinking again about oak barrels and what they do to a wine's taste.

On the train back from Manhattan through New Jersey, I reminisced about how, when I first fell in love with wine in the late 1970s, I had savored that touch of dried-wood flavors blended in with the fruity berry tastes at the end of the palate of red Bordeaux, and, like most first loves, about how it still makes me smile just to think about it.

It also got me thinking about how, in the hundreds of conversations I've had with winemakers, so many of them seemed embarrassed when I commented that in tasting their wines – red, white, even bubbly – how well the flavors of the barrels used in fermentation and aging complemented the fruitiness in their wines. They replied self-consciously, muttering about mostly using neutral oak and how the barrel is being utilized mainly as an instrument of oxygen exchange in aging the wine. Producers of red wines in particular reacted as if I had caught them fantasizing about Mega Purple when they were married to Anthocyanin.

Anyway, Cole's experiment involved taking a single barrel of Napa Cabernet coming from his best section of vineyard and, after cleaning it up post-fermentation, stuck it in a barrel, sealed it with a wooden bung and left it for a year to begin aging. No racking, no rolling, no *battonage*. "Actually, it was just for 11 months," Cole admitted. "I couldn't wait any longer to see what happened." On my train ride south, I resolved to follow up with him to find out more details of the experiment that had now evolved into standard practice.

My interest in wood flavors are a result of growing up in a rural area where we cooked on a wood stove, which meant my brothers and I had to chop down big trees – often some kind of black or white oak – saw them into sections and then split them into firewood. Always chewing on splinters, I knew the spicy, sappy taste of raw oak as contrasted to the dry, milder, nuttier flavors of a weathered piece of a poplar plank. I was also well aware of the aromas of a piece of scorched, but unburned, piece of wood.

So, years later, when I tasted early David Bruce Chardonnays during the 1980s with their new oak influences, it was like I was chewing on an oak splinter – 180 degrees from the mellower oak of those early Bordeaux wines.

What does oak add in aromas and flavors to those of a wine's fruit? It varies, of course, but fresh oak with no or little toast gives a tart citrus spiciness, like lime or even orange peel, especially in lighter white wines. With toasted barrels, depending on the degree of charring, the flavors go strongly toward vanilla, especially vanilla bean, or coconut, along with creaminess, toastiness and even browned butteriness. (Not surprising, producers of big, buttery California Chardonnays – the love/hate demarcation with Chardonnay drinkers – are more than happy to talk about what their barrels' "toasted head" does to the taste of their wines.)

Barrels that have been used multiple times and have little or no toast (especially if they were steamed, not fired, in their making) – ones that winemakers like to refer to as "neutral oak" even though they still give off mild flavors – tend to impart nuttier flavors like walnuts and especially ground almonds. In red wine, you can often pick up a hint of marzipan as a result.

But back to Cole. When we finally got around to talking again a few weeks later – this time on the phone – he filled me in on his barrel work. "That first wine was a special clone of Cabernet, our best lot, on the heaviest clay," he said. "When I opened the barrel after 11 months, it was quite a bit reduced without the oxygen, but my goal was to get more texture. That barrel went into the 2016 J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve blend."

"We used more barrels with the 2017," he said, "but eventually we came to the conclusion that using barrels with the sealed or hard bung for six months was just about right – we got the right texture while maintaining the freshness of the fruit." After the first six months, the bung is removed, the wine checked for sulfur and topped off, then resealed for another six months and repeated until the aging reaches around two years..

Cole has also moved to using some larger puncheons of 500 liters with 60 to 65% new casks and only a medium toast with no toasted heads. The wines are neither filtered nor fined before bottling. Today, he says, all the Sullivan reds go through the hard bung process. Even if Cole won't mention it, my tasting notes from New York note not only the texture, but also the wonderful oak aromas and flavors.

If you have a chance to read the tech notes about the nitty and the gritty of how a wine is produced, you will often find mentioned the proportion of new oak used, sometimes its country of origin, but seldom anything about its toast as though that were only incidental to the process.

If red wine producers are hesitant to talk about the taste of oak in their wines, Champagne producers find it practically heretical to do so. Of course, until recent times most of Champagne's base wines were made in oak cooperage before the advent of stainless steel, and some of the top producers still use oak, especially in their top cuvées.

A few years ago, I attended a delightful multi-day blending session at Krug in Reims. Krug is famous for the number of barrels it uses in its Champagne production, but, again, every time I asked questions regarding the details of their oak treatment, there would be that preface, "Now, we don't use the oak to give a taste to the wine."

Bollinger is another premium Champagne producer to use oak barrels for its top wines and is also the only Champagne house to still employ its own cooper, although, as it uses second-use Chardonnay barrels from Burgundy, the cooper's work is mainly annual repair of old barrels.

On its website, Bollinger makes a good comparison between using traditional wood and modern stainless fermentation in producing the base wines for bubbly: "Stainless steel has the advantage of preserving the full character of a wine, thanks to its material and perfect seal. Wood adopts a different philosophy based on exchange. Oak is a living, slightly porous material that plays an important role in the oxygenation of wines. Air, necessary for the development of flavors, circulates in very small quantities through the wood fibers. This light and constant oxygenation softens the tannins and controls the wine's acidity. Naturally, the aromatic complexity of Champagne is more refined than with wines made in stainless steel tanks."

Nothing in there, of course, about what it does to the taste of its Champagne.

Additionally, any discussion about developments or trends in oak would not be complete without mentioning that not all oak barrels are French, although the bulk of them are even if they are more expensive. If you ask about American versus French oak, the short answer is, "American oak is a little spicier." Rioja producers is Spain, for example, have traditionally used American oak in their Tempranillo-based wines, although that practice is lessening somewhat.

Surprisingly, few American West Coast wineries use American oak barrels. However, Napa Valley's Silver Oak has long been an outlier in being one of the few premium producers to use solely American oak – in fact since its founding in 1972. Some time ago, I was working on an article and the subject came up. I wondered with the passage of time whether the Duncan family had given in and started using French barrels. Hardly! In fact, they doubled down on their American oak preference by acquiring their own cooperage in Missouri in 2015.

They report that with Cabernet they still believe it tastes better.

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