

Abstract

Oak Barrels - “Old fashioned” or still in fashion? The art of using oak in wine making

In recent years it is very trendy to produce and consume wines with a little influence of oak or even without any oak contact. This is also thanks to the headway of the “natural wine movement”. That people are turning to more neutral, lighter style wines is not a coincidence. There was a time where really heavy wines with high alcohol content, lots of tannin (also coming from the oak) and way too much application of new oak barrels was common. The extreme usage of oak was totally overwriting the wines itself.

Nowadays many winemakers prefer to make their wines according to “biodynamic” or “organic” methods, where they have to follow certain rules in the steps of wine-making including the use of neutral containers and large big wooden vessels. These containers do not change the wines character in the way charred new barrique barrels can do. Other producers still prefer the barrique barrels saying it gives some extra structure, a little more finesse to the wine.

Who is right? It is a good question. I think the too much usage of oak can be as bad as the total decline of it. It is important to choose the right container for the right wine.

Using different containers during the wine production has a long history. The material of the vessels has changed as the new technical achievements came up and the wine makers got more experience. From the 15th century the wooden containers gained importance which was thanks to its relatively light weight, easy to work with, and being massive enough to hold the wines (and of course other materials). The evolution of the profession of cooperage made it possible to maximize the options of the wood. After a while it would be clear, that oak is the best species of wood for barrel production. It has a perfect affinity with wine. Gives not only plus flavors, color but influences the structure of the wines in a positive way, what the consumers also like. There are different sizes of oak barrels, and every wine producer has to decide what size, what kind of seasoning, toasting of barrel suits the most to their wines.

With the evolution of science people got more and more knowledge what are the substances influencing the wines character and what kind of chemical reactions are happening while the wines are stored in the oak barrels. The various type of oak are containing different amount of the certain components (lactones, phenols...etc.) so providing different effect to the wines.

After visiting an acknowledged cooperage in Hungary and experiencing the steps of the barrel production from choosing the trees, trough cutting and seasoning the staves, to assembling, shaping and toasting the barrels made me to appreciate even more this profession and understand why are the barrels and so the wines aged in oak barrels so “costly”.

Of course with the technical development came up different alternative products like oak chips, inner staves. They can be produced lot cheaper then the real oak barrels and having similar results. The application of these methods is more ethical question by every winemaker. Although the trend stays for the wines with moderate oak impact and alcohol, but there is still place for the full bodied wines with intense oak influence. I am working at Weingut Scheiblhofer – one of the leading family wineries in Austria which is famous about “heavy”, “oaky” wines. My personal experience at tastings and participating on wine fares shows that people still love these characterful wines and the sales is not decreasing, but on the contrary. At the winery we are using only barrique barrels (the 225 l, charred oak barrels, made of French or American oak), and filling them three times. Filling the wines the first time in to the new barrels gives the most flavor, tannin, color, and every further filling reduces the effect of the wood. With this kind of playing with the barrels we can produce different styles of wines, and address broader costumer segments.

Trends are coming and going also in the wine business. The costumers age range also determines the drinking habits. People in younger ages, and people who do not really know much about wine prefer lighter, easier understandable wines. For the group of costumers who have the opportunity to try wide selection of the wines of the world, can taste wines deliberately and gain knowledge, and are open minded, it can be really interesting to see what can be achieved by good combination of an oak barrel and a precious wine.

In my thesis I was trying to show an overall view of the using of the oak barrel in wine-making based on my personal experiences, which I would like to demonstrate during the viva voce exam too.