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An Oak Revolution Is Underway In The World Of Wine



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I cover food, wine, drinks, travel; host dinners; and consult on wine [FULL BIO](#) ✓

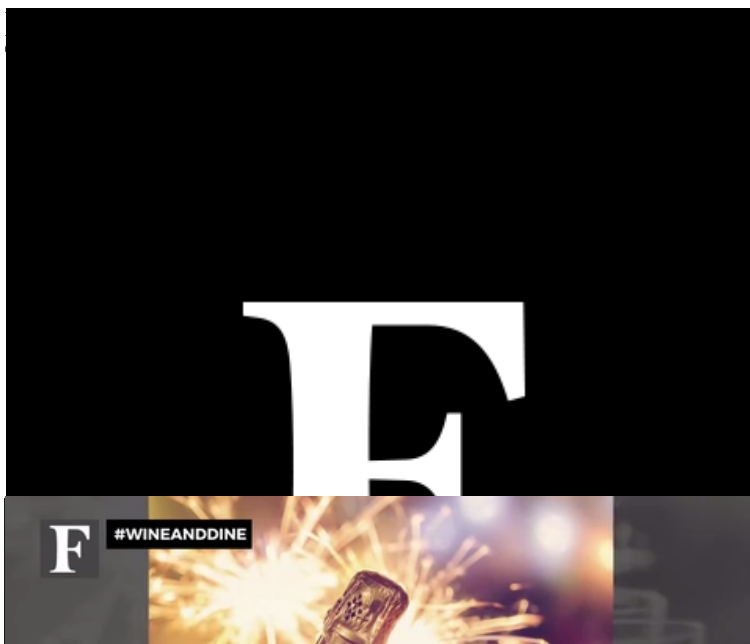
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In May of 2015, Silver Oak, the highly regarded Cabernet Sauvignon producer whose Napa and Alexander Valley wines have garnered legions of fans over the decades, purchased full ownership of the Missouri cooperage that they had been 50-50 partners in since 2000 and renamed it The Oak Cooperage. By doing so, they became one of the only wineries in North America to operate and own one for themselves. In hindsight, this seemed to have been indicative of the changing nature of how wine and spirits producers in the United States employ and purchase oak, which, it turns out, has been evolving for years.

The reliance on oak in the wine and spirits industries, and the expanding markets for both, has changed dramatically over the years. From storage and transportation vessels to seasoning agents, shifting technologies and consumer tastes have caused producers to alter the ways in which they employ oak. Those changing uses, in turn, have impacted the products that consumers ultimately purchase.

For decades, in the latter part of the 20th century, a heavy hand with oak was generally seen as a mark of quality in the world of wine—the California Chardonnays I grew up with in the 1980s and 1990s were generally of the ‘oak bomb’ school of thought, and it wasn’t unusual for high-octane wines bursting with the telltale vanilla and baking spice notes of

Inevitably, the pendulum began to swing in the other direction, and a renewed sense of restraint became the M.O. of many of the top producers. While there remains to this day a strong market for wines whose dominant characteristics are derived from the impact of oak, its use in this country on the high end seems to be skewing to the more judicious end of the spectrum.

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It’s also evolving in terms of the sourcing of oak for barrels. David R. Duncan, President and CEO of Silver Oak, is among the many wine professionals who see the benefit in increasingly focusing on specifically where oak comes from, which forests in certain regions, as a way to tailor even further the range of flavors, aromas, and textures that it imparts on a wine .



Wineries are utilizing oak in inventive, original ways, like this open-topped barrel fermentation taking place in a warm room at Alpha Omega (Credit: Alpha Omega).

For Silver Oak, “we’re starting to zero in on the terroir of oak, really. And we’re just at the beginning of that. Where in France, they’ve been doing it for 200 years or 250 years,”

United States, that process is still in its infancy. But, he suspects, we will catch up here and increasingly understand the benefits of various forests across the United States. His reliance on barrels from The Oak Cooperage, and the level of focus on its oak sourcing in the Upper Midwest, is a step in that direction.

Jean Hoefliger, Winemaker for Alpha Omega, pointed out that “the barrel itself can come from different regions, with different impact. And that depends of course on the type of wood, the type of tree if you want, and of course the place at which the tree is growing.” The terroir of a particular forest—the rain amounts, how much sunlight it benefits from, the temperature variations—all of this will impact the density of the wood grains, which is of tremendous importance. “And depending on that, in addition to the type of oak, you’re going to have grains of the wood that are more dense, less dense, [with] more air, less air, going through. And the wood becomes...a tool for the wine to soften. The goal of using oak is because...[it] lets some air into the wine to actually oxidize certain tannins, and soften the wines. So in addition to the truly taste [or] aromatic side, there is actually a chemical benefit to the wood. And depending on the region that you use it from, you can have a different impact.” Hoefliger has chosen to magnify this, and conducts fermentations in a warm room with open-topped fermenters, which, he contests, softens the wines even further.



with how barrels constructed from wood cut from specific parts of various forests in France change the wine being stored in it. He even employs GPS coordinates to better track where the various trees come from in each forest. Duncan told me that The Oak Cooperage is at the beginning stages of that process themselves, though he expects it will take decades to get a good handle on the details. As with everything in wine, it's a slow, demanding process--one grape harvest each year isn't necessarily conducive to speedy processes of this sort.

Other producers are examining oak in tremendously fine-grained ways, too. Sara Fowler, Director of Winemaking at Peju Province Winery in Napa, regularly conducts barrel trials in order to see the differences between one cooperage's products and another's. "My barrel trials will have anywhere from 30-60+ different types of oak, each of them having a unique flavor profile," she wrote to me in an email, adding that one of the benefits of this was that it highlighted any consistency issues for individual cooperages, which she can then report back to them in order for issues to be remedied. In the long term, this has had a positive impact: "I have seen the quality in oak improve immensely over the past 18 years," she noted, adding that "in particular, American oak...can be as good as French Oak, and back in the day that wasn't the case."

The market for oak has changed over the years, and though several years ago there

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have slowed down. “I think we saw that happening, and there was a definite trend of concern, where wood prices were going up, and the availability of wood was going down, but it seems like the acceleration of that has slowed somewhat,” David Duncan explained, noting that the market seems to be stabilizing. “If you had asked me that two years ago, I would have said it’s absolutely a perceived threat, but I think right now we feel like it’s in a manageable, cyclical [place].”

Jean Hoefliger also pointed out that, “I think the price of wood going up to where it is today, at \$1000, \$1200 a barrel, is going to be one of the natural selections of who can use wood...But the wine consumption and need is growing in the world, so the average of wine needed to satisfy the world’s wine consumption is growing. So we’re going to have to find ways, but a lot has been done also on alternatives, meaning chips and staves and things that are different models for different price points...And I think in the wine world the use of new oak will be dictated by price point, because of the price of a barrel.” He added that wines in the under-\$20 range will face difficulties using a significant percentage of new oak barrels just because of the expense.

Still, with changing consumer tastes and the demand growing for wine at price points across the spectrum, there seems to be room for bottlings that have utilized oak in countless ways, whether because the economics of winemaking have forced them

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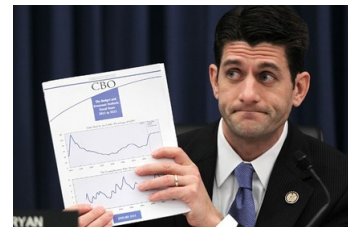
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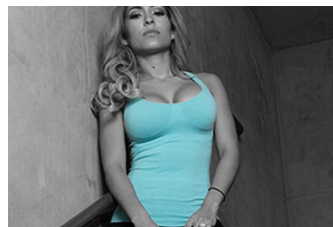
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