

NorthBayBiz
Vinewise column
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Last month we talked about the myth of who is and isn't making any money in the industry. With every news report from the financial institutions that monitor wine sales everything is peachy keen with sales up and especially in the higher end wines. If this is to be believed then wineries and growers are just bitching to be bitching. Now for my other dilemma.

If you are ever in a crowd of wine makers and you want to stir the pot for the sake of conversation just ask one simple question- What is the best oak for wines? If you have 50 winemakers you will probably get 150 different opinions. It seems that every winemaker has his favorite. Right off the bat the first issue is French vrs. American. It is here you will find some agreement with most stating they like French the best, not that American doesn't have it's supporters. The purpose of oak is to impart some flavors to the wine as well as to age the wine that is really a softening effect with micro oxidation occurring. If you are not sure what oak smells like just open any Chardonnay and watch out for the oak 2x4 to hit you on the head. The same is true for many red wines and winemakers all have their opinion on how much oak a wine should have. When buying oak barrels it is far more than just say ship me 50 French oak barrels. The exact forest where the wood came from would be stipulated. Each different forest in France will give different flavors. Then the amount of "toasting" will be stipulated. This is a process during the barrel making where a fire is lit inside the unfinished barrel and the wood is charred to add different flavors. Also do you want the heads of the barrels charred also? Finally many winemakers will say that the most important thing is who is the cooper. (A cooper is a barrel maker, hence the term cooperage for vessels that hold wine.) The current unfavorable dollar exchange rate has made barrels costs go up and a 55-59 gallon barrel will cost \$600+ and many wineries will have a 3 year rotation for their barrels and they are increasing in size as well so the cost of French oak is a major

winemaking cost. Is it necessary? That depends on your taste but the wine drinkers have been convinced that Chardonnay must leave oak splinters in your mouth to be any good.

Are there other alternatives? Of course, there is American oak, which imparts different flavors than its French cousin. Could a rookie wine drinker tell the difference? Probably not but with a little practice one could. Are they better flavors or worse? Here is where opinion comes into play. American oak barrels cost about \$200 per barrel so there is a significant cost difference and it may encourage you to use American on lower priced wines. Other alternatives include the use of oak staves (thin pieces of oak wood) that are put in to the fermenting or storage stainless steel tanks and also oak chips can be added to wine to add oak flavor. There is probably more of the latter two than one would believe because most winemakers would NEVER admit to using these techniques unless they are trying to compete with "Two-buck Chuck". With the trend toward more fruit driven wines with New World wines oak is a little less important and even the French have admitted to a need for change in the new global economy that we are in. Old world wines notoriously have very few fruit characters and are more about age and wood. The last big lover of French wines is God- oops I mean Robert Parker- who continues to push them down our throat when the real market is for new world wines (America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Chile, and Argentina, and even Spain joining in). The French stubbornness has cost them very dearly in the marketplace.

With all of that said which is the best wine- French oak or American oak aged? We are right back to opinion again but let me prove that with a couple of example. We are familiar with A.Rafanelli Winery in Healdsburg. They only make 13,000 cases per year of Zinfandel, Cabernet, and some Merlot. Zinfandel has been their flagship and I learned how to taste and drink wine in their cellar many years ago and long before the winery. Try 1966. David used to use some American oak but is currently 100% French. With limited production and great wines he has developed a very strong cult following. Virtually all their wine is sold at the winery or mailing list and only a few select restaurants that have been with them forever. Direct sales

are full retail sales and thus higher profit. Tasting room sales are limited to 1 or 2 bottle and it is virtually impossible to get on the mailing list and buy wine. Maybe when somebody dies you can get his or her place on the list. What makes their wine so great? Fruit, French oak wood, winemaking? Who really knows? You could probably put someone else's wine in the bottle and unknowingly think it is great. Frequently labels influence our taste and hence the reason for blind tastings. That doesn't mean you go home blind but that you can't see the label when tasting. Okay so the Rafanelli cult thinks those are the best wines in the world (You need a reason to pay \$105 for the Terrace Select wine) and the French oak may well be a part of that. You are in the cult if you are lucky enough to have the opportunity to buy some wine from A.Rafanelli. How do they do in judgments? If you do not enter you can't win and they certainly do not need the publicity gold medals would bring.

Let's drive north or east and look for another cult winery, but this one makes about 80,000 cases of wine and uses ONLY American oak for their Cabernets, which are world famous. They also produce a Merlot under a sister label and winery and recently have purchased another winery in Healdsburg to serve as a crush facility. People line up at the winery gate at 5:30 am on release day so that they will be assured of getting some of the new release. If you guessed Silver Oak you are correct. They have an equally adamant cult following with a much greater production and I emphasize, "They use ONLY American oak". So who is right about which oak is best? Maybe the beauty is in the mouth of the beholder.

Now you can go out and buy some and check your palate. Good luck. If you love them both then you are a real wine consumer since they are wonderful and complex, each in their own right.