



PROGRESS IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS
See how a strategy to take a regional store national helped put jobs back on the map. [▶ Learn More](#)

Goldman Sachs

FT.com unlocked
4 weeks complete and unrestricted access for just \$1 ▶



Wednesday Nov 10 2010
All times are London time

SEARCH ▶

Go

QUOTES ▶

Go

▼ SERVICES

- ▶ Email briefings & alerts
- ▶ RSS feeds
- ▶ Portfolio
- ▶ Currency converter
- ▶ Executive jobs

▼ LOG IN

▶ Tour ▶ Sign up

Username

Password

Remember me

FT.com
FINANCIAL TIMES

Food & Drink

[FT Home](#) > [Life & Arts](#) > [Food & Drink](#)

- Front page
- World
- Companies
- Markets
- Global Economy
- Lex
- Comment
- Video
- Podcast
- Interactive
- Management
- Business Education
- Personal Finance
- ▼ Life & Arts
- Arts
- Food & Drink
- House & Home
- Style
- Books
- Pursuits
- Travel
- Columnists
- How To Spend It
- Wealth
- In depth
- Special Reports
- Jobs & classified
- Services & tools

Jancis Robinson on oak barrels

By Jancis Robinson
Published: November 5 2010 22:38 | Last updated: November 5 2010 22:38

Twenty years ago wine producers around the world measured their success by the number of new oak barrels they had in their cellars – preferably made from French oak, bought at vast expense from the world's most experienced coopers (French ones) with the same capacity as those traditionally used in Bordeaux and Burgundy, 225 and 228 litres respectively – the size a strong man can turn on its side and roll along with relative ease.

An oaky taste, something a bit toasty and dense that overlaid the fruit, was fashionable for a while – especially in the Chardonnays and Cabernets that proliferated in virtually every wine region that could ripen them. There was also an exhibitionistic element in producers being able to show off just how much money they had invested in France's well-conserved oak forests. (Today, a new barrel can cost €600.)

But fashions and tastes change. Now I find that for even the least sophisticated taster, "oaky" is a term of distaste, and even some of the most ambitious wines may be rejected by neophytes because there remains a trace of the oak barrel in which they were kept in their youth to give them the potential to age – although the wines are designed to be drunk long after any perceptible trace of oak has been subsumed.

Skilled winemakers are keen to put suitable wines into oak for a year or two before bottling to expose them to the very slow oxidation that helps clarify and stabilise them without more brutal chemical or physical alternatives. Oak also encourages a sort of complex marriage-brokering between the wines' many constituent parts. Wines tend to come out of barrels more complex than when they went into them.

Partly in response to the change in consumer tastes, an increasing proportion of winemakers are eschewing the traditional small barrel size, often called a barrique, for bigger barrels in which the proportion of wine in direct contact with wood is reduced. This is particularly marked in places such as Italy's top wine regions Piemonte and Tuscany where, before the advent of the barrique and a widespread but temporary belief that it would somehow confer French magic on their wines, large old oak casks were the norm.

The late Luigi Veronelli, an influential Italian wine writer, was so enthused on a trip to California in the 1980s by what barriques did to wine that he convinced many of Italy's top wine producers of their virtues. This led to a wave of concentrated, oaky Italian reds and whites, but there is now a distinct return to larger oak casks. On a recent short visit to Tuscany I was given samples of the same wine based on the local Sangiovese grapes aged in different sizes of oak and it was notable how much more refined and precise the wine aged in 500-litre casks was – refinement and precision being 21st-century virtues. Think of oakiness as shoulder-pads.

But larger casks are also invading the classic French wine regions which have traditionally only used the classic smaller barrels. In Burgundy last week Grégory Patriat, perhaps most lavishly funded young winemaker in Burgundy in his capacity as négociant for [Name Name to come], Jean-Claude Boisset's "viticulteur-winemaker", could hardly contain his enthusiasm for what 500-litre barrels do for his fine white wines. "They give more purity, more tension, make the wine more crystalline, give it more minerality." (Minerality is a very early 21st-century virtue.)

He doesn't use 500-litre barrels for his reds, arguing that they don't soften tannins as effectively as the Burgundian 228-litre pièce, but, he says, "since 2007 we have rediscovered our whites thanks to 500-litre barrels – and they're cheaper!" The larger barrels may be more difficult to handle, but they take up much less space per volume of wine than traditional smaller casks, provided of course that your cellar is not so cramped that you cannot even get a larger size through the door (a consideration in many small, family-owned caves in Burgundy).

The celebrated French wine-writer Jacques Dupont overheard this conversation and volunteered that in the Champagne region, to

▼ EDITOR'S CHOICE

- [Crisis? What crisis? - Oct-30](#)
- [Grape grandchildren - Oct-22](#)
- [Hot and bothered - Oct-15](#)
- [Noir thrillers - Oct-08](#)
- [Pure pleasure? - Oct-01](#)
- [Grape wars: Chile v Argentina - Sep-24](#)

How those barrels work

Oak in general is a watertight wood but some species are more porous than others. So-called "white" oaks are better at holding liquids, in particular the American quercus alba. It is packed with tyroses, structures that plug the tubes and fibres of the trunk, blocking the path of the liquid.

Jancis's pick

One of Tuscany's least

SUBSCRIBE TO THE FT

Sign up today and get a 4 week RISK-FREE trial to the Financial Times Newspaper.

[More](#)



PROGRESS IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS
See how a plan to grow a renewable energy company ended up creating more than just megawatts.

[▶ Learn More](#)

LATEST HEADLINES FROM CNN

- [Protesters attack UK party HQ](#)
- [Economic rifts loom as G-20 gathers](#)
- [French president signs pension reform bill](#)
- [Crippled cruise ship gets Navy aid](#)
- [3 die in Baghdad attacks on Christians](#)

[More](#)



▼ BLOGS

- ▶ [beyondbrics](#)
- ▶ [Brussels Blog](#)
- ▶ [Clive Crook](#)
- ▶ [Don Sull](#)
- ▶ [Economists' Forum](#)
- ▶ [Energy Source](#)
- ▶ [FT Alphaville](#)
- ▶ [Gavyn Davies](#)
- ▶ [Gideon Rachman](#)
- ▶ [John Gapper](#)
- ▶ [MBA Blog](#)
- ▶ [Money Supply](#)
- ▶ [Tech Blog](#)
- ▶ [The Undercover Economist](#)
- ▶ [Westminster Blog](#)

▼ ARCHIVED BLOGS

- ▶ [Banquo's blog](#)
- ▶ [Budget blog 09](#)
- ▶ [FTfm](#)
- ▶ [FT-dot-comment](#)
- ▶ [Future of capitalism blog](#)
- ▶ [G20 blog](#)
- ▶ [Health & Science Blog](#)
- ▶ [Lex Wolf blog](#)
- ▶ [Management Blog](#)
- ▶ [Margaret McCartney's blog](#)
- ▶ [Martin Lukes](#)
- ▶ [Money Matters](#)
- ▶ [Science blog](#)

Jobs Business for sale Contracts & tenders

SEARCH Enter keywords

Chairperson

[European Commission EBA](#)

Business Development Director

[Aerospace Composites](#)

Head of Group Buying / Head of Group Commercial

[Retail](#)

Retail Sales

[Marketing Services](#)

RECRUITERS

FT.com can deliver talented individuals across all industries around the world

[Post a job now](#)

RELATED SERVICES

[FT Lexicon](#)

[FT Bespoke Forums](#)

[Market research](#)

[Growth companies](#)

[Corporate subscriptions](#)

[Luxury Travel brochures](#)

[Analyst Research](#)

[MBA-Direct.com](#)

[FT Newspaper subscriptions](#)

[FT Diaries](#)

[FT Conferences](#)

[FT Syndication services](#)

[The Non-Executive Director](#)

Web2PDF

converted.by/Web2PDFConvert.com

▶ REGIONAL PAGES

- ▶ China
- ▶ India
- ▶ Brussels

▶ INTERACTIVE

- ▶ Podcasts
- ▶ Ask the expert
- ▶ Markets Q&A
- ▶ Audio slideshows
- ▶ Interactive graphics

which he was returning that night, a similar phenomenon is already evident. Oak ageing of the base wines for champagne has been increasingly fashionable, but many producers wishing to reduce obvious oakiness are introducing larger casks, and – a significant qualitative and economic factor – reusing them more often.

obviously oaked wines is also one of its very best. The stunning 2007 vintage of Sassicaia is currently on sale at a range of UK stockists and prices, from around £110 a single bottle, or £1,050 a dozen in bond. See wine-searcher.com

Again in the shoulder-pads era, the percentage of new barrels used – preferably 100 per cent – was considered a measure of quality. Today, it is no longer regarded as shameful – at the pre-eminent Bolgheri winery Sassicaia it is positively relished – to admit to reusing a certain proportion of barrels once, or even twice. Used barrels tend to move down the ranks. In Bordeaux, for example, a barrel used for first-growth Château Lafite in its first year may be used for the second wine Carruades de Lafite in its second year and then shipped down to their property in the Languedoc Château d'Aussières for its third and fourth years.

Less obvious oakiness is by no means restricted to Europe. Australia has long had a tradition of using 300-litre "hogsheads" and larger "puncheons" to mature its full-throttle reds, and reduced oak flavour has played a major part in perhaps the biggest and fastest stylistic turnround the wine world has ever seen, Australian Chardonnay's recent rapid weight loss. Even in California, where oak tolerance can seem endemic, barrel salesman Mel Knox, who sells the hugely reputable Taransaud and François Frères barrels to some of the least cash-strapped wine producers in the world, reports that he sold 200 500-litre barrels last year and perhaps 10 of the 600-litre demi-muids commonly used in the Rhône valley.

A lower cooperage bill seems in tune with current austerity, but the tonneliers are not doing too badly. The latest toys for trendy winemakers are an array of fine wooden fermentation vats to be used, just once a year, before the wine goes into whichever barrels are chosen for it.

My wine of the week

Neurdorf, Maggie's Block Pinot Gris 2009

New Zealand whites have a special place in the hearts of British wine drinkers. They earned it on the strength of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc and international superstar Cloudy Bay. But now the country's winemakers have been keen to diversify into other white wine grape varieties – particularly the aromatic varieties associated with Alsace: Gewurztraminer, Riesling and, especially, fashionable Pinot Gris.

One of the most admired producers of New Zealand Pinot Gris is Neurdorf of Nelson in the north west of the South Island. Neurdorf, Maggie's Block Pinot Gris 2009 Nelson was one of the wines I liked best when tasting a range from some of New Zealand's top producers recently. The grapes, all handpicked, come from a vineyard at Brightwater on the stony, alluvial Waimea plains south of Nelson. Soils here drain so fast that irrigation is essential, but they retain crisp grape flavours.

This is a good example of a fine, vibrant wine in which oak played only a minor part. About a fifth of it was fermented in barrel but most of the fruit was fermented and raised in neutral stainless steel. The resulting blend, 13.5 per cent alcohol, is sensationally aromatic and yet has the same sort of meaty undertow as a fine example from Alsace. The wine is rich enough to go with Thai dishes – or to be drunk as an apéritif. It should retain its liveliness over the next three years.

Where to buy

The 2009 is available at £16.20 from the online retailer of fine New Zealand wines, www.mustwines.co.uk. The 2008 is almost as good, however, and is currently on offer from www.drinks.co.uk at £12.

For more reviews and tasting notes go to jancisrobinson.com

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2010. You may share using our article tools. Please don't cut articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.

▶ Print article ▶ Email article ▶ Clip this article ▶ Order reprints

- Twitter
- Digg
- LinkedIn
- Yahoo! Buzz
- Delicious
- reddit
- BX
- Facebook
- stumbleupon
- Viadeo

* Minimum delay 15 minutes

All times are London time