



Text by Janine Carter, Cellar Door Manager Photograph by Narlea Lentfer.

## FROM ACORN TO BARREL

During a visit to France with cooperage, Tonnellerie Boutes in 2010, Voyager Estate Winemaker and Winery Manager, Travis Lemm, had the opportunity to see the full barrel production process, including the milling and seasoning yards, and final assembly in Bordeaux.

The origin of the oak will play a significant part in the wine. Whilst visiting a number of forests, Travis learned the differences in regionality. For example, according to cooperage, Tonnellerie Saint Martin, it is generally accepted that oak from the north-central Allier forests tends to have spicier characters, in comparison to oak from the south-central region of Limousine which is more aggressive, quickly adding vanillin notes and deepening colour.

The oak tree is between 210 to 230 years of age when it is felled, having been selectively cultivated for this purpose. Tightly controlled by the French government, coopers select the trees they want based on a number of factors - location, height, girth and straightness of the trunk.

The tree is milled into sections and graded for its intended use, from furniture, to oak barrels, to veneer. The barrel portion is then milled and refined further into staves for seasoning up to three years prior to the actual barrel being produced.

ROWS OF STACKED WINE-FILLED BARRELS MAKE AN IMPRESSIVE SIGHT. WHAT MAKES IT MORE IMPRESSIVE IS UNDERSTANDING THAT EACH HAS BEEN PICKED WITH CARE TO PLAY ITS OWN PART IN CREATING THE FINAL WINE.

The importance of oak on some grape varieties cannot be underestimated. Winemakers must match oak characters with the grape's natural characters in order to balance the tannins of each, building additional structure in the wine while enhancing or adding aromas and flavours.

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In the same way that wines show regionality due to the soils and climate, barrels also impart natural influences based on where the oak is grown. Barrels are named based on the forests that they come from, giving an indication of the characters they will pass on to a wine.

Another influence is the grain of the wood. Larger, open grain allows the wine to penetrate quickly, having a stronger impact. Tight grain won't allow the same penetration, therefore the characters will be more subtle and will require the wine to mature for longer in barrel.

Whilst oak is a natural product, there are also man-made influences such as the 'toasting' of the inside of the barrel. Toasting can be done in many different ways - toasting at lower temperatures will allow subtle smoky characters to deeply penetrate fine grain oak, ideal for Chardonnay. Toasting at high temperatures will have more impact as it imparts stronger charr characters. Consequently, barrels come with a 'toasting rating' to indicate low, medium or high. Winemaker Travis Lemm says Voyager Estate tends to select light to medium toast. "We don't want too much toasty oak influence, we prefer to see subtle oak and nutty nuances rather than heavy char aromas."

Coopers may also select staves (the individual wood batons that make up a barrel) from different trees. By custom picking the staves, the barrels can be created in more of a 'house-style' so that winemakers can be assured of consistency in the characters that an individual cooper's barrels will impart.

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Generally Voyager Estate purchases around 300 new oak barrels a year. Barrels are purchased with specific varieties in mind, and are used for up to 4 to 5 years. The Estate uses a number of different coopers, sometimes for the same wines. For example, our Chardonnay is aged in barrels from Latour, Seguin Moreau, Saint Martin, Cadus and Dargaud & Jaegle. Each of these coopers select oak from specific forests which impart different characters. It then becomes a balance in building oak characters that will complement the wine characters in the final blend.

In addition, different Chardonnay clones react differently to the oak. Gin Gin Clone has great aromatic intensity but can lack length on the palate so the winemaking team must choose barrels that will boost the structure and length of the wine. Clone 95 has great acidity but fewer aromatics, so the barrel is used to add smoky/flinty characters and to build mid-palate structure. However, when producing our Shiraz, we select barrels made from both French and American wood. As Travis explains: "The French barrels impart spicy aromatics and savoury palate characters that build structure and complexity into the wines, while the American oak gives sweeter vanillin characters and adds a fleshier mid-palate to the wine."

Our Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot components spend between 18 and 24 months in barrel. Travis says Voyager Estate uses the tightest grained oak possible to allow the fruit and tannins to integrate and mature over a longer period.

Of the many wonderful things about making wine, the opportunity to carefully integrate all of the elements, from the vineyard to the winery, including selecting the best oak regime to create beautifully balanced wines, is one of the most challenging and also the most rewarding.

