

Oak staves make a comeback

Wineries looking to maximise flavour and be ecological need to look no further than the BarriQ – a cutting-edge nude barrel, which has just been introduced to Australia.

Kellie Arbuckle

LONG ASSOCIATED WITH average quality wines, oak staves are now making headway in the premium wine market.

Using the same wood and seasoning methods used in Chateau barrels, industry suppliers Flextank and Oenowood International have come up with a nude barrel – provocatively called the BarriQ – which they say provides the complex oak flavours often sought by high-end wineries.

But, unlike ordinary barrels, the BarriQ does not have a hoop or the shape of the barrel. It's a series of oak staves which are inserted into the wine tank by the winemaker who, depending on their taste preferences, can insert as many staves as he or she desires.

The BarriQ operates in conjunction with a polymer vessel: while the BarriQ controls the oak flavour, the vessel

controls the oxygen.

Flextank managing director Peter Steer says it's the quality control aspect that sets the BarriQ apart from alternative oak products.

"The primary benefit of inserting the oak into the wine is that you're getting exactly the right flavours, because we're using the right quality and process of making that oak," Steer said.

"The BarriQ replicates the aromas, flavour and tannins that are produced from top barrel brands, but it's more controllable."

Steer says the thought process behind the BarriQ involved revisiting an old idea.

Staves have long been used to produce wine. However, the wood traditionally used in staves was of average quality, which meant wine quality was average

at best.


"People have always grappled with this method. It works for cheaper wines but once you start trying to do it for higher quality brands, it just doesn't work," he said.

Two years ago, Steer noticed an increase in demand from winemakers seeking alternative ways to produce high quality oak flavours.

At that time, Flextank decided to reinvigorate staves by using premium quality wood and increasing the thickness of the staves.

In addition to providing a more controlled way of producing high quality oak flavours, the BarriQ is both environmentally and financially ecological.

A typical oak barrel has a barrel stave thickness of either 27mm or 21mm. Of



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this thickness, only about 4-6mm of the stave is actually penetrated by the wine – the rest is there simply for the structural integrity of the barrel and is usually discarded when the barrel is expended (usually after three to five years).

The BarriQ – which also has a stave thickness of 21mm – is inserted in the wine and, therefore, used in its entirety, reducing waste and money, says Steer.

“All you’re buying is the oak you want to use – not the 21-23mm that you’ll throw away,” Steer said.

“The BarriQ uses one quarter of the amount of oak that you use in an ordinary barrel, therefore fewer trees have to be cut down.”

According to Steer, the staves used in the BarriQ cost 70 per cent less compared with staves used in barrels because there is less wood.

“You achieve the same result but you spend a lot less money, you have more control and you’re more ecologically sustainable,” he said.

Steer says the BarriQ is suitable for wineries who want an edge in oak flavour.

“It’s for wineries wanting to make \$40-80 bottles of wine who need that subtle edge in quality. For them, to use B-grade barrels is not enough,” he said. **CW**



Alban Petiteaux and Francois Parthon de Von with the finished staves. All oak is obtained from sustainably managed PEFC certified state forests.

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