



Wine barrels rolled

New trend: Tony Lee of Foxeys Hangout Winery in Red Hill uses Flextanks.

Picture: MARK GRIFFIN

WINEMAKERS have been maturing their vino in oak barrels for centuries.

But that is all about to change thanks to a revolutionary wine-maturation tank, or "vessel", made in Victoria.

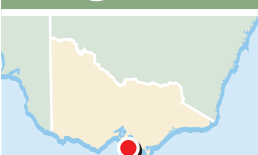
Mechanical engineer and former Yarra Valley winery and vineyard owner Tony Flecknoe-Brown has pioneered the plastic Flextank vessels, which are prompting many wineries in Australia and overseas to kick tradition aside.

A special polymer allows a controlled amount of oxygen into the tank, similar to how oxygen enters oak barrels.

Flextank tanks are able to impart flavours, tannins and aromas, and according to the makers, are far more cost effective than oak barrels.

About 625 wineries across Australia are using

At a glance



Who: Tony Flecknoe-Brown

What: wine

Why: tanks that breathe

Where: Mornington

Report: CIMARA PEARCE

Flextanks instead of oak barrels.

More than 200 of these are in Victoria.

Tony Lee, of Foxeys Hangout Winery on the Mornington Peninsula, has been using Flextanks for

the past three years.

"I was interested in the concept and the process so I bought some to experiment with and I've been very happy with the results," Tony said.

"If you want to make red wine with some oak flavour more cheaply than buying new barrels you can make better wine using Flextanks and oak staves."

Tony said there were numerous benefits to using the tanks, including the ability to clean them unlike oak barrels. They also allow some varieties of wine to breathe without an added oak flavour.

"I can clean (them) like I can clean a stainless-steel tank. I can bring it back to

being perfectly clean, but they still breathe," he said.

"I don't want an oak flavour in sparkling shiraz but I do want it to have that structured flavour profile that a wine gets from spending 12 months in an oak barrel."

"I tend to prefer the flavour profile from (the tanks) for the sparkling shiraz."

Tony has eight 1000-litre Flextank vessels which are maturing merlot, pinot noir and vermentino varieties.

Flextank managing director Peter Steer said the business, which is based in Abbotsford in Melbourne, was focused on changing the wine industry in the

same way that screw caps have widely replaced corks.

"We are taking on the best coopers in the world and beating them at their own game," Peter said.

"Oak barrels are romantic but they are expensive, impractical and unsustainable."

Last month, wine industry research on Flextank vessels was presented at the Australian Technical Wine Industry Conference in Adelaide.

The three-year \$1.8 million research program took place at Tamar Ridge Estate Kayena Vineyard and Winery, north of Launceston in Tasmania, and investigated the maturation of a small parcel of

MV6 pinot noir.

It was matured in a number of Flextanks and the same parcel of wine was also matured in French oak barrels.

Both wines were monitored during the maturation process.

The results of the trial validated Flextank's claims that their vessels could mature wine in a notable way.

"The key differences between Flextank barrels and the oak is the maturation is more reproducible in the Flextank barrels," Australian Wine Research Institute senior research scientist Dr Bob Damberg said.

"There's less variation from one container to another compared with barrels."

"The wine matured in the same way as the oak barrels but with less variation."

Flextank has customers in Australia, New Zealand, Israel, India, Indonesia, Malta, Spain, Germany and is looking to expand further including the US.

"The economic situation makes this precisely the right time to be bringing this technology to the US market," Peter said.

"The response from winemakers was exactly the same as in Australia."

Flextank accounts for almost 5 per cent of the Australian market and its share is growing at between 15 and 30 per cent a year.

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