

@ THE WINERY

PENCIL SHAVINGS

Why can you taste a woody flavour, a bit like pencil shavings, in most red wines?

We need to start with a bit of history. Wooden barrels were used extensively as containers for a wide range of liquids and foodstuffs from the time of Caesar Augustus (around 50 B.C.) right up till the early part of the 20th century. However these days plastic, stainless steel and glass have entirely replaced wooden barrels, except for wine and spirit ageing.

Winemakers have always known that when wine is stored in oak barrels, the wine and the wood marry together to form a richer, more complex flavour and texture, so the best red wines are still aged for 12 to 24 months 'in barrel'.

There are several main ways in which an oak barrel (and oak is the only kind of wood used) improves and enhances a wine -

- First, oak 'breathes' a little, so that micro-oxidation takes place during barrel ageing. This very gradual oxidation reduces the astringency and increases colour and stability. It also evolves the fruit aromas to more complex ones.
- Second, the oak wood components contribute their own flavour or textural note to the wine. The most familiar of these are vanilla flavours, sweet and toasty

aromas, tea and tobacco overtones and an overall structural complexity of tannins. There are several varieties of oak tree used, with American oak giving more vanilla-like flavours and French oak providing more spiciness and tannins.

- During barrel construction the wood is heated by flame so it can be bent to form the barrel. The longer the flame exposure, the more toasted or charred the wood becomes and this also affects the flavours imparted to the wine.

But oak barrels are very expensive and they can only be used for around 3 years before needing replacing, so most wineries now use cheaper alternatives. These include ageing the wine in stainless steel tanks with some oak 'chips' (like wood shavings) added to the tank, or re-using old barrels and simply suspending pieces of new oak in each barrel.

Back to wine barrels themselves, amazingly the design hasn't changed much in a thousand years. They don't have any nails, glue or screws - its all done by the exact fit of each wooden stave, held together by steel hoops. Each size of barrel has a different name and the most common sizes in Australia are *Barrigue* (225 litres), *Hogshead* (300 litres) and *Puncheon* (475 litres).

Warwick Adams

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