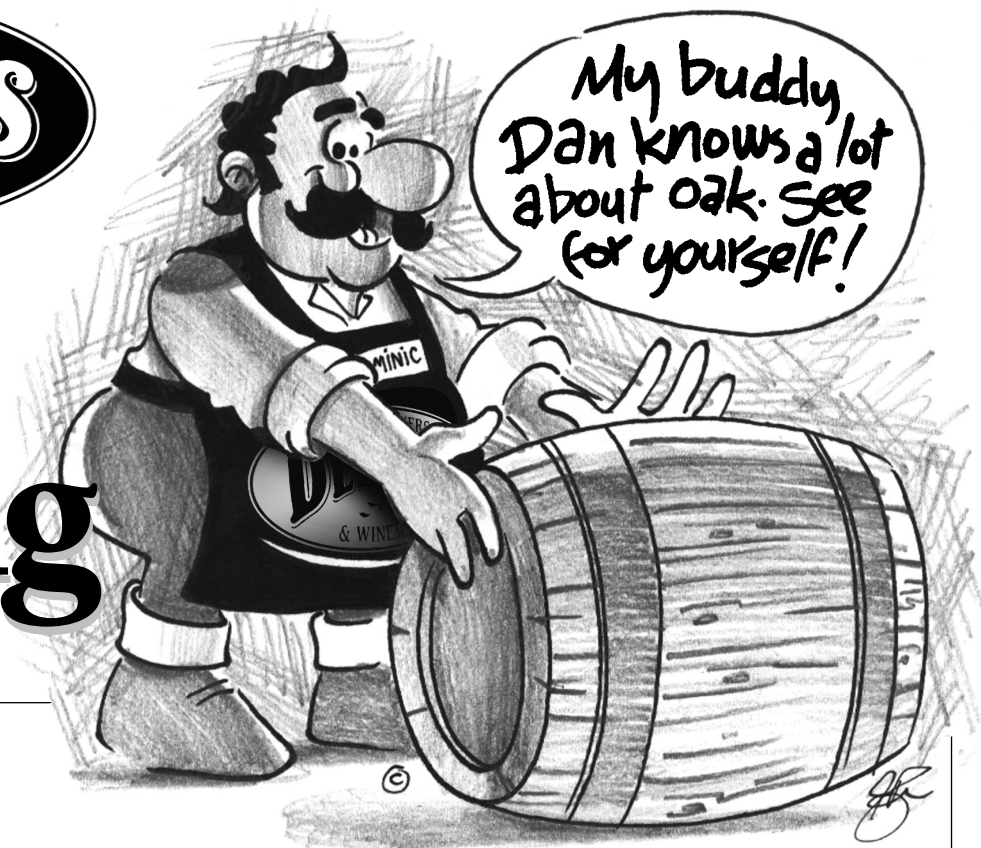




Tips on oaking

Written by a DeFalco Staff Member



Oak barrels have been a part of the winemaking tradition for centuries, although this was not always the case. It is said that barrels were first used merely as a storage container. Their rounded construction allowed for easy maneuvering on the ships responsible for exporting wine. The chance discovery that barrel aging improved wine has been our good fortune ever since.

The porous nature of wood allows for an oxygen transfer while simultaneously permitting minute amounts of wine to evaporate through the staves. This give and take harmony contributes to an overall softness that is desirable in a mature wine. Oak also imparts flavour to the wine adding complexities that can be described as smoky, vanilla, woody and earthy.

The mysterious marriage of oak and wine has led many amateur winemakers on a quest to seek out their own barrels and reproduce the process of a commercial winery.

Unfortunately there are obstacles that create a problematic and bumpy path for those of us that want to experiment with barrels;

1. Good barrels are expensive and hard to come by. (i.e., DeFalco's does not carry oak barrels)
2. Barrels require constant care and preparation.

It is my opinion that oak barrels are not practical for most home winemakers.

There are ways to duplicate most of the advantages of barrel aging without the frustration of barrel ownership. One way is to use oak chips which are standard in some of the wine concentrate kits and are sold separately in 35 gm packages. Oak chips can be used to enhance any wine. Even if the style you are making does not traditionally have an oak characteristic, you can modify it to your standards. You are the boss.

Oak chips are prepared as follows:

1. Dissolve one campden tablet in one cup of warm water.

2. Add desired quantity of oak chips to the mixture (usually 35gms) and let soak for 10 minutes.
3. Add prepared oak chips to the primary fermentor only when signs of fermentation are evident.

Most of the chips will be left behind after the first racking and what survives will eventually sink to the bottom of the carboy.

Another product is **French Oak Aging Compound**. This is liquid oak in an alcohol base that is added to the finished wine at bottling time. Oak compound is convenient because the effect is instantaneous. Winemakers can experiment with differing quantities to achieve the desired level of oak flavour.

Whatever you choose, just remember that oak character, like any flavour or sensation, is extremely subjective. Some people like intense oak flavour while others would do away with oak all together. One of the benefits of being your own vintner is the license to modify and enhance the product to your standards and ultimately achieve the best wine for your needs.

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