

WINE & SPIRITS

Into the wood

Just like grapevines, trees come in many varieties, but oak is the standard when it comes to aging wine in barrels for more nuanced flavour



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Technically, it takes just two ingredients to make wine: grapes and yeast. But that definition falls short with most great wines, especially reds. There's a third and, some would argue, indispensable component: wood.

Barrel fermentation and aging are the standard practice for most fine reds and many whites, especially chardonnay. Barrels are not just attractive containers designed to wow winery visitors on cellar tours. They impart flavour and luscious texture, resulting in a profile many of us crave, especially at times like now, when temperatures start to dip. Vanilla, coconut, caramel, spice, butter, sweetness and even the smoky character of a freshly extinguished campfire can owe their presence to oak. To people who prefer their cuvées crisp and clean, it can all sound like a Catskills comedian joke: "Waiter! Waiter! There's a tree in my wine!"

Depending on the barrel type, the resulting essence can vary from subtle to aggressive. To tone down the effect, winemakers will often stagger their barrel supply so that they've always got some old barrels on hand to mix in with new for a blend. With used barrels that

contained previous years' wines, much of the oak essence is gone after the first fill or two. In such cases, the wood mainly plays a role in softening the new wine's astringent tannins through slow contact with the air outside the porous wood. New oak is more pronounced and can even add tannins of its own.

As with grapevines, trees come in many varieties, though oak is the wine standard because of its structural qualities and the absence of musky or resinous notes. Oak from French forests, with especially tight grains, is the dominant choice, delivering a more nuanced flavour that tends to integrate best with the delicate fruitiness of most grape varieties. A single French-oak barrel costs upward of \$1,000. American oak, with broader grains and a price of about \$600 to \$800, tends to be more aggressive and astringent, though it's the wood of choice for especially fruity, dense wines, such as the famous and expensive Penfolds Grange of Australia.

Charred flavours usually are the most conspicuous signs of wood aging. A barrel maker, or cooper, usually toasts the barrel by standing it over a small fire during assembly. The toast can be light, medium or heavy. The customer decides. And the intensity of oak flavouring depends on how long the wine is left to age, from as little as three months for some chardonnays to two years or more for the most concentrated and expensive reds.

Where oak is concerned, a good cellar hand prefers to tread softly rather than wield a big stick. Most people agree that wine should taste like it was grown in a vineyard, not a forest. I think the offerings below, all oaked, strike a good balance.

2008 (British Columbia)SCORE: **91** PRICE: \$27.99

This luscious red spent 18 months maturing in a combination of new oak and one- and two-year-old barrels. Smooth and ripe, the opulent fruit hides the 15-per-cent alcohol well. A hint of dark chocolate harmonizes nicely with a suggestion of espresso-roast coffee. Lovely stuff. Try it with lamb.

Punica Montessu 2009 (Italy)SCORE: **90** PRICE: \$24.65 in Quebec

There's star power behind the Sardinian estate of Punica, a joint venture controlled in part by the Tuscan estate of Tenuta San Guido (which makes the cult red Sassicaia) and Giacomo Tachis (often called the founding father of modern Italian wine, responsible for crafting Sassicaia as well as the two other famous super-tuscan reds, Tignanello and Solaia). Another partner in the venture, Sebastiano Rosa, is technical director at Tenuta San Guido and makes the wines here. A blend of carignan, merlot, cabernet sauvignon and syrah, this polished red shows creamy chocolate, dark fruit and savoury nuances along with a light toasty quality. It would match nicely with a velvety stew. Available only in Quebec.

Penage Reserve Chardonnay 2007

(B.C.)

SCORE: **90** PRICE: \$20

Full-bodied, smooth and round, this white offers up butterscotch and orchard-fruit flavours with fresh acidity to balance the nicely integrated oak. It would be swell with grilled salmon, lobster or poultry. Available in B.C. through www.pentage.com.

Cono Sur Reserva Syrah 2008 (Chile)SCORE: **89** PRICE: \$12.95

Here's a rich and creamy red, with a lightly savoury backdrop. The black-pepper quality probably owes more to the grape variety, syrah, than to any wood influence. But the rich, dark-skinned fruit finds attractive support in toasty notes from the barrel. Lamb shanks would be nice.

Georges Vigouroux Pigmentum Malbec 2009 (France)SCORE: **87** PRICE: \$13.95

Malbec was planted in the Cahors region of France long before it rose to fame as Argentina's signature red. This is a spicy quaffer, with a texture that starts smooth, then gets lively with acidity. I like the subtle charred quality. Try it with grilled beef. The price is \$14.99 in British Columbia.

Hillside Estate Syrah 2008 (B.C.)SCORE: **90** PRICE: \$25.99

As in a Dairy Queen sundae, there's a vanilla underpinning here. But, like in that sundae, it's a complement to the dark-berry fruit and chocolate flavours. There's also a dusting of coffee and spice for good measure. Duck breast would like it. Available in B.C. through www.hillsideestate.com.

Mission Hill Five Vineyards**Cabernet Merlot 2009 (B.C.)**SCORE: **88** PRICE: \$16.45

Cassis, dusty cedar and tobacco combine with dark-roast coffee, vanilla and dark chocolate in this lightly tannic red. A good value and a fine partner for steak.

Errazuriz Estate Reserva Pinot Noir 2010 (Chile)SCORE: **87** PRICE: \$13.95

Light medium-bodied, this bargain pinot manages to deliver a pure expression of the grape's berry-like hallmark, not the case with most under-\$15 renditions. The toasty-smoky essence is a tad pronounced for a pinot, but it's pleasant. Grilled salmon would suit it.