

Oak – a conundrum for wine aficionados

By Eric Pfanner, New York Times

Aÿ, FRANCE – Want to start a fight at a wine tasting? Just mention “oak.”

Few issues get wine lovers as worked up as the question of whether to ferment or age wine in wooden barrels, usually made of oak. Doing so can help mellow the wine and add structure, richness and complexity. Done with a heavy hand, it can also smother the wine with the vanilla-like flavor of oak, obscuring its fruit, freshness and origins.

The use of oak increased in the 1980s and '90s as winemakers around the world responded to consumer demand and critical acclaim for ripe, powerful reds and plump, buttery whites. Then came the backlash. Now things have swung so far that some self-consciously trendy wine drinkers recoil in mock horror at any hint of wood, extolling the virtues of wines made in vats of stainless steel or other neutral materials.

Dining at a fashionable organic restaurant in London not long ago, I overheard a woman at the neighboring table tell her partner, “Mmm, this is a good Chardonnay; it must have been unoaked” – as if that grape variety grew on trees, making oak removal one of the necessary stages in the production of a good Chardonnay.

But when it comes to oak, at least one wine region, Champagne, is – forgive me – going against the grain. And you will find no stronger champion of oak than Claude Giraud, who runs Champagne Henri Giraud, a medium-size, family-owned producer in the grand cru village of Aÿ.

“There is no great wine without a great forest,” Giraud said

during a recent tasting at his winery.

Until the 1950s, most Champagne underwent its primary fermentation, during which the sugar in the grapes is converted to alcohol, in oak. (A subsequent fermentation, in the bottle, produces the bubbles.)

In the postwar years, however, many producers discarded their barrels and shifted to stainless steel. Giraud argues that this was about cost and expediency rather than quality; at the time, demand for Champagne was growing rapidly and fermentation in stainless steel is cheaper and easier to control.

I'm not sure these were the only reasons. While most of the big brands rely heavily on stainless steel for their entry-level bubbly, some of the greatest Champagnes, including Dom Pérignon, never see any oak, either.

"I wouldn't want to be dogmatic about it," said Michael Edwards, a British writer who specializes in Champagne. "It's also a question of taste."

But he added: "It's possible to make excellent Champagne without oak."

A few well-known Champagne producers, including Bollinger and Krug, stuck with wood over the years. More recently, small producers like Jacques Selosse have attracted a cult following with oak-fermented Champagnes.

But Giraud is dismayed that even the oak enthusiasts in Champagne mostly buy their barrels from Bordeaux or Burgundy, using wood from forests like the Tronçais, in central France, even though Champagne has a forest on its doorstep: the Argonne.

The cooperage business in the Argonne Forest survived the heavy fighting of World War I, when an Allied offensive pushed

through the area in 1918, leaving tens of thousands of casualties, as well as shrapnel that still scars many of the trees. Up until the 1950s, Giraud said, there were close to 200 coopers in the Argonne, supplying many of the Champagne houses. But now, Henri Giraud says it is the only Champagne producer that is still using wood from the forest.

Giraud has mounted a campaign to try to persuade his fellow producers to follow him back to the Argonne. He recently set up a partnership with the French National Forestry Office to manage the forest, and renamed his top Champagne cuvée Argonne in an effort to bring more attention to his cause.

“For a few years, Champagne has been reorienting itself toward quality, and oak barrels are back,” he said. “If Champagne really wants to return to its roots, it needs to come back to its forest, the Argonne.”

This is not about Champagne chauvinism, Giraud insisted. The oak of the Argonne is especially suited to making the local bubbly. Its tight grain has a more subtle influence on the wine than looser-grained oak, adding elegance and refinement rather than obvious oaky flavors.

Giraud has even identified distinct characteristics in the oak from different parts of the Argonne – caused, he said, by variations in the composition of the soil and the exposition.

Winemaking in France has long been underpinned by the principle that differences in vineyard terroirs – that is, the geology and geography of individual plots of vines – are the key to the diversity and greatness of the country’s wines. Does terroir matter to oak barrels, too?

To make his case, Giraud produced samples of unfinished Champagnes that had completed their primary fermentation in oak from three parts of the Argonne Forest. The differences were indeed striking, so much so that in one case a roomful of tasters, including me, misidentified one sample as having been

made from Chardonnay, when in fact it consisted of Pinot Noir.

Whether the subtleties of oak terroir are discernible in a finished Champagne is debatable. Most Champagne is a blend of wine from different vineyards and, often, from several vintages, so I'm not convinced that these nuances survive. Using different kinds of oak does give blenders a bigger palate with which to work, though.

There is also an element of transparency. Henri Giraud takes this to extremes, identifying every barrel in its cellar with a distinct code, specifying the origin of the wood.

Why does this matter? Camille Gauthier, one of the last representatives of an old craft called "merandier," which consists of selecting and preparing wood for barrel-making, said many French coopers use inferior oak from Eastern Europe, passing it off as top-quality French wood when they sell their barrels to winemakers.

"Traceability is just as important with oak as it is with horse meat," said Gauthier, referring to the recent scandal over the relabeling of horse as beef in European food products.

With oak, provenance is not the only variable. The size and age of the vessels also matter. Small barrels have a more pronounced oaky influence than large vats. Similarly, new wood leaves more traces behind than old oak – one reason many Champagne producers buy used barrels from Bordeaux or Burgundy.

Henri Giraud uses a fair amount of new oak for its top wines, including Argonne. The 2002 vintage of Argonne, the first to be released, certainly shows the influence of wood; it is a big, bold Champagne, with a deep golden color. It has a "winelike" quality, resembling white Burgundy in the richness, persistence and silken layering of its flavors.

Like some other Champagnes that are fermented in oak, this is a robust wine. Rather than quaffing it as an aperitif, you'd be better off serving it at the table. I kept imagining it with monkfish, though I'm sure other seafood or light-colored meats would be good companions, too.

Oak-fermented Champagne may not be to everyone's liking. Because oak breathes more than steel, many of them have the signature nutty note of oxidation, which can be off-putting, especially if you expect Champagne to taste primarily of bubbles and sugar.

I happen to like these Champagnes, though I object to the pricing of some of them. Giraud's Argonne, for example, starts at around \$223; for the price of a case, you could buy yourself a very nice oak table instead.