

[SUBSCRIBE »](#)

## **Alternatives Go Mainstream**

Weak dollar, product enhancements, good results fuel popularity

by **Alan Goldfarb**

### **• HIGHLIGHTS**

- Higher-end winemakers seem increasingly willing to accept oak alternatives' perceived virtues and are learning how to maximize their benefits.
- The suppliers are secretive. No representatives we contacted for this report agreed to disclose their company's regimens for toasting.
- Debates rage regarding firing in ovens versus firing over flames, and regarding the relative importance of source versus seasoning.
- Indirect winemaker endorsements are now easy to come by, but few will name the wines in which they use alternatives.

It's a segment of the wine industry that will continue to boom as long as the dollar remains fragile and large quantities of spice- and vanilla-laced wine are produced. Concurrently, the oak alternatives business will continue to be kinetic as high-end winemakers accept its products' perceived virtues and learn how to utilize them to their maximum benefit.

The largest segment of the oak alternatives (or adjuncts) business, stave inserts--whether oven toasted or, increasingly, hand-fired--has flourished, especially in the last couple of years. Oak flavoring products (*below*) in a flurry of dizzying forms--toasted and non-toasted oak chips, spirals, string beans, dominoes, marbles, zigzags, cubes, balls, granulates, sticks, chains, bags or powder--have seen only modest gains in the higher-priced segment of the market, but an upswing in the \$20 bottle and under category.

This led Duane Wall, vice president of Nadalie USA based in Calistoga, Calif., to conclude that his industry "is still changing. It's not the final form that we're going to see down the road. It's still modifying as the wine industry wants different products. We're still adjusting to it. We're all still trying to find our way."

The "new-barrel alternative" trade, as Alicia McBride of Innerstave in Sonoma, Calif., prefers to call it, has seen a dramatic increase in business over the last two years as the dollar has plummeted. That fall is reverberating in the higher end of the marketplace where new French

oak barrels have surpassed the \$1,000 mark.

But McBride, the general manager at the firm that was the one of the initiators of adjuncts in the U.S. beginning in 1979, wouldn't substantiate her claim of palpable sales increases with hard numbers. Nor would she reveal the heating formulas of her company's bread and butter, the oak stave insert business.

### **Fierce competition**

Closely held facts seem to be the norm in an industry that has become ferociously competitive. Every adjunct representative we contacted for this report refused to disclose his company's regimen for toasting its products. Various heating methods, along with sourcing and air-drying of the wood, are the three key elements that have led to an increase in acceptance of these products.

McBride, who does not agree with Duane Wall's assessment of her industry as "still trying to find our way," went as far as to disclose that a number of her of her clients ("less than a dozen") use her products in parts of their blends that sell for upwards of \$100 per bottle. However, she wouldn't divulge their names.

This in part supports Wall's point that the oak alternative business is "modifying" its products and methods in order to come as close as possible to replicating an actual new barrel.

Nonetheless, McBride retorts, "I don't agree....Large-format woods and barrel inserts are definitely things that we are going to see for years and years and years. Wine's not wine and wood's not wood," she continues, explaining the differences. "There's some not-so-good wood out there, which gives the adjunct industry a bad name. We have come a long way educating the winemakers how to evaluate quality and make the decision of what's best for the wine, and to give them barrel-like flavors and attributes.

"We are in ultra-premium wines (of \$100 or more) because we can offer flavors that the barrel can't (as in aging and toasting). We can give the winemakers flavor profiles that they can't find in a barrel."

### **Oven vs. hand firing**

To obtain flavor complexity, Innerstave and many of its competitors have opted to use

convection ovens to toast their products, while a few others are hand firing their wood. Ken Seymour is the general manager at Mistral Barrels, whose parent company, Tonelería Nacional, is based in Chile. As with Sonoma neighbor Innerstave, Mistral uses ovens to toast its wood.

"We use convection to toast (because) of its hot purified air and because of the accuracy," he explains. "We achieve a flavor profile with more accuracy as opposed to fire; and more consistent and uniform toasting.

"Fire toasting can't achieve (that). You'll have different toast levels; and it's hard to control fire. Then if we combine temperatures and time, the chemical reactions start to bring out different flavors. (With oven toasting) we can dial in temperatures to bring out the aromatics.

"With fire you need to have someone with a good eye who knows when to take the wood off the fire."

At Nadalie, Wall says his company has been fire toasting for at least a dozen years, and he concedes that his firm's method is more challenging.

### **Alternative Nomenclature**

Just what do we call the products that are made to replace or augment an oak barrel? In an industry that is experiencing great sales increases, there doesn't seem to be a universal term to describe what it is they produce.

As a suggestion, try these on for size:

- Barrel alternatives
- New barrel alternatives
- Oak alternatives
- Oak adjuncts
- Oak additives

Any ideas? We'd like to hear

about them.

**A.G.**

"It's difficult to fire toast. It's so easy to oven toast and to ignite wood that way. Fire toasting is much more difficult than putting it in an oven with sensors. Our (method) is a time-consuming, closely watched process," he says.

Hand firing of larger formats of wood is what StaVin in Sausalito, Calif., has been practicing. But, according to Jeff McCord, StaVin's vice president of research and technical sales, the company has begun to implement an undisclosed proprietary toast regimen that would more closely mimic a barrel, compensating for the loss of all-important lactones that occur with heating oak, and minimizing dusty, raw wood characters.

McCord contends that "Most manufacturers resort to modifying the toasting process to increase vanilla concentration to give their products a desirable sweet character. This character is unfortunately missing in any barrel-aged wine, and a sure sign that oven toasted alternatives were used."

StaVin's hand fired method, McCord believes, "gives the closest to new-barrel flavors." Part of the process of retaining lactones is the seasoning. According to McCord, StaVin dry ages its wood for three years.

Jean Vittot, the vice president of sales and marketing for Canton's Xtraoak, steadfastly comes down on the oven side. The Lebanon, Ky., company is launching a new range of convection-oven toast levels. While others also offer a spectrum, Vittot insists that because his company has been in business for 30 years and constantly confers with winemakers, Xtraoak's gravitas should not be discounted.

Tonnellerie Radoux uses ovens for its Pronektar oak chips that emulate the coffee roasting process. This convection method employs the same principles used for coffee beans, with adapted equipment.

OC Inc. of Piketon, Ohio, utilizes a hand-built oven that vice president Todd Nathan boldly says, "gives us a special taste, a little bit better than the other guy." Nathan says his company, which sources wood locally from southern Ohio and Kentucky, also has "a little different cooling method." However, when pressed as to what that method is, he demurs, "I back it up with flavor tests."

Another company utilizes yet another type of oven. Oak Solution's evOak division uses an

infrared toaster. Specialist Paul Abbott insists that it helps to establish flavor profiles that are "barrel-like." Abbott says that sales are up 50% from last year. The infrared system utilizes hot ceramic emitters, over which a stave is passed until a robot flips it, enabling it to come back in the other direction.

This year, **Oenodev of Santa Rosa**, Calif., introduced an assortment of oak chips designed for white wines, rosés and delicate reds, called Fraicheur. According to account manager Len Napolitano, the chips are toasted in a convection oven in separate batches at relatively cool temperatures, so that they do not contribute heavy oak aromas.

VinOak USA, an autonomous division of Cork Supply USA, which in 2007 began offering barrels and alternatives, takes advantage of VinOak's 10-plus-years experience in Australia. VinOak takes toasting further by employing a GC/MS (gas chromatography/mass spectrometry) machine to better profile flavors and to assure quality control and consistency.

An atomized oak powder on the market for the last eight months is called Oak Tan from Fine Northern Oak in Minnesota. Philippe Michel, whose Santa Rosa, Calif., company, Oak Traditions, represents the product, says this powder is more concentrated than conventional oak powders. Toasted chips are placed on a conveyor belt and sprayed with water, which is said to extract flavor components of the wood. Accordingly, Michel says, the liquid is atomized in a cylinder as if it were "a perfume," and transformed into a thin powder.

Michel says the result is a powder with a very dense concentration of oak--5 grams per 100 liters. Infused into a barrel, it dissolves immediately as an oak aromatic component, or in fermentation to give oak texture and smoothness.

Evoak also is working on a line of powdered wood tannin that it expects to launch imminently. This product, Paul Abbot asserts, will allow flavors that are going to be "precise and pure."

*Some manufacturers contend that oak alternatives simulate flavors created by barrel-aging wine.*

### **Source vs. seasoning**

Innerstave's McBride is adamant that the source of the wood is paramount--more important than how long it is seasoned. Her company, which oven toasts its products after aging the wood for two years, gets its oak--without going into specifics--from the "center of France."

"Because there are lots of components coming into the aging of wood, you look for the microclimate that wood is aging in," she says. "It's not just how the cooper treats it, but where the oak is from."

Winemaker Marco Capelli, who consults for a number of small wineries--most of them in California's Sierra Foothills--is a firm believer in using alternatives, and he's able to differentiate the various products.

With hand fired products, he says, "There's more of confectionary, vanillin aroma and flavor character coming from the Nadalie. But StaVin is very similar to what you get from a barrel.

"Innerstave's are really exotic, with lots of vanilla and caramelized sugar--toasty character that I haven't seen in a regular barrel, French or American."

Last vintage, the winemaker for a California-based negociant used radiant-heat toasted spirals on 40% of her 100,000-case production of Chardonnay. Placed through a barrel's bunghole to achieve accelerated extraction time, the "production coordinator," as she prefers to call herself, and who requested anonymity, says the product "was terrific," because of the flavors.

Barrel Mill's Steve Hobbs believes that his company's infusion spiral is a "more elegant way of flavoring wine." Developed exclusively over the last five years by the Avon, Minn., company, the spiral contains cuts that allow oak flavors to permeate the wine faster than other alternatives. Hobbs claims the spirals, toasted through a conveyor gas oven, do their job in four to five weeks.

Hobbs also says that sales for his product "have gone from nothing and exploded geometrically."

The negociant using the spirals says that placed in neutral barrels, the spirals added vanilla notes, and "the wine benefited from the medium toast" achieved in an oven. She plans "to use a ton (of the spirals) in the future," but acknowledges, "I haven't had great luck with other products. With chips, sometimes you get a lumberyard taste."

She is skeptical about hand firing, saying, "You don't have much control. Fire toasting sounds like a marketing thing to me."

But scientist Jeff McCord says that mimicking barrels by using hand firing the way StaVin

does is not just a marketing ploy. "At StaVin," he says, "the fire toasting process employed gives the closest to new barrel flavors as possible."

### **Experimenting with staves**

Kimberlee Nicholls, winemaker for 100,000-case Markham Vineyards in the Napa Valley, plans to experiment with hand fired alternatives this vintage by using products from a quintet of manufacturers.

"I'm going to do a trial this year because of the exchange rate," she reports. "Looking at staves that are going into barrels seems more like a holistic approach because they're hand fired." But another important element to Nicholls is the wood ratio of the inserts to the barrel.

"What I find that seems to be the biggest factor is the square footage that is inside--how wide and thick--that determines how much 'new oak' percentage is in your barrels," she believes. "In my (red wine) trials, I will focus on making sure the amount of theoretical new oak or square footage is the same (as a new barrel)."

Marco Capelli, however, has seen the results of the staves and bags he's used thus far, and will no doubt look at the other products available to him.

"We want to try every single product that's out there," he says unequivocally. "I haven't found a bad (alternative product) on the market. They're all a little different....The wine industry is looking to use less expensive and more renewable ways to get oak into a wine. If you can pack into one barrel that which will take 10-15 barrels, it makes sense."

Capelli then drops this: "The flavors that they impart into the wine are very good and are very close to flavors that you get out of a regular barrel. Side-by-side with expensive barrels, some of the customers of some of my clients' wineries prefer (the wines made with) the alternatives."