

Winemaker Interview: Barry Gnekow

Consultant calls oak barrel alternatives tools for an imperfect world

by **Laurie Daniel**

During more than 30 years of winemaking, Barry Gnekow (pronounced NEE-koh) has worked with a broad range of California wineries and has been a pioneer in technologies such as reverse osmosis for alcohol removal and ultra-filtration. A longtime winemaker for J. Lohr Winery in San Jose, Calif., he developed the first widely sold dealcoholized wine, Ariel. After leaving J. Lohr and Ariel, he opened Gnekow Family Winery, a custom-crush facility in Colledgeville, in the Lodi area. Since 1999, Gnekow has run a San Francisco-based winemaking consulting company, Barry Gnekow & Associates, working with wineries such as Hahn Estates, Michael-David, Mettler Family Vineyards, Calistoga Cellars and Guenoc. Gnekow graduated from the University of California, Davis, in 1973 with a bachelor's degree in biochemistry, then went on to earn a master's in food science at Davis.

Becoming a believer

When Barry Gnekow started experimenting with barrel alternatives in the early 1980s, he made his own. "I was making a house wine for Hyatt Hotels nationally and needed to keep the cost low," he says. "The chips at that time were horrible. They all had a green, bitter component and made the wines worse. It was better to not use them than use them."

So he asked an acquaintance who had started a barrel-shaving business to save the shavings for him. "We would go pick them up, sort through them and dump them in the tanks," Gnekow says. But the shavings didn't sink, he adds, "So we would buy nylon stockings at the local Walgreens and have our cellar guys stuff them with the chips and attach valves to the stuffed stockings to try to get them to sink into the wine."

The result? "It actually did make the wine taste better." The white—a blend of mostly Chenin Blanc and Pinot Blanc—won a gold medal at the Los Angeles County Fair that year, Gnekow says, and the red blend won a silver, which was the highest medal awarded in the category.

"Wine sales took off, and I was a believer," he says.

L.D.

Wines & Vines: What are the advantages to using barrel alternatives rather than oak barrels?

Barry Gnekow: It's another tool in the winemaker's box. It's all about having the right tool for the right job. So it really depends on the job. Cost is the obvious advantage. With oak alternatives, you're talking less than 20 cents per gallon. But ultimately, whatever you need to make the wine taste better is the way to go, whether it be a \$1,000 barrel all the way down to using just a pinch of oak tannin the day before bottling.

Many times with a start-up brand, there is the issue of keeping wine in the pipeline and not losing the shelf placements that your sales team has worked so hard to get. The next blend has to taste as good, and you don't have the luxury of leaving the wine in the barrel or in the tank on staves for another 30 days to get the desired amount of oak flavor. It's like a moving target, and you need to have the various alternatives available to get that oak profile in the wine to make that bottling date. You could also be supplementing the growth of the brand with outside wine from the bulk market that has not had the same oak regime that you did in-house.

A lot of wines that are blended from barrels never have the same depth that you tasted from the samples you got or pulled, until the blend is all in one tank. For logistical reasons, you can't get the blends together.

There are lots of pragmatic problems you can solve with the alternatives, and consequently you need to have all of them available to solve individual problems. Also, the size of your wine operation makes some products, like barrels, unrealistic to use. The reverse is, if you're very tiny, you can use all these products, no problem.

W&V: Any disadvantages?

Gnekow: Just the image of being somehow non-authentic. You see all those shots of wine people standing around in barrel rooms. It always amazes me that people want to have their weddings in a barrel room. I mean, nobody wants to be seen in a meat locker with a dead carcass hanging from the ceiling. So somehow we got the romance, and we lose the image with the alternatives.

W&V: So you can achieve basically the same results with the alternatives rather than a new barrel? Or are there some wines for which you would use a barrel rather than alternatives for quality reasons?

Gnekow: No, a new barrel is almost always the best way to go—in the perfect world. But winemaking run as a business is far from the perfect world. There are so many moving parts. The only real answer to the question is in the taste of the wine. With the parameters you're dealing with in a particular wine, such as cost and time, will the alternative make the wine taste better?

W&V: Do you prefer to use barrel alternatives during fermentation or aging? Or does it depend on the wine?

Gnekow: Cabernet, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Syrah—red wines—you certainly can do some adjusting at the last minute, prior to bottling, prior to blending. The whites, you definitely have to do that during the fermentation. You can't get a barrel-fermented character, no matter what, unless you do it during fermentation.

For reds, I like using untoasted chips—you add them to the crusher—both for color stabilization and flavor profile.

Again, it's not black or white. In a given wine that you're producing, there's no reason that you can't use all the products at different points in the wine's aging and also in different parts of the blend. You may have some that are in brand-new, expensive French oak barrels. But that doesn't mean, because you've done that, you can't use untoasted chips in the fermenter or you can't use beans in a tank of stainless where you're trying to keep a fruity portion of the wine going. It's like a palette of a painter. The winemaker should be able to use all these things for different parts of the wine. This idea that, well, I'm either using chips or I'm using French oak barrels—that's not how it should be. It's another tool to use to complete the winemaking. There's no reason why you can't be using all of these alternatives in all different aspects of the wine blend.

You may have committed to medium-toast barrels, and then you taste the wine, and you think, "God, I'd really like some heavy toast." So you call up the alternatives people and say, "Send me some heavy-toast staves. I'm going to put them in my tank." And that's something you don't know until you're already into the winemaking.

W&V: How have oak alternatives improved during recent years?

Gnekow: The gap between some of the alternatives and the barrel is narrowing. I think it's the air-drying and other drying and toasting techniques that are giving the real big jumps in quality.

W&V: Do you have any go-to products?

Gnekow: I love the StaVin products, from the inserts all the way down to my unusual personal requests on chips—for example, heavy toast for a chocolate note needed to hide some veg in a Syrah. I also love the Oenodev white barrel-ferment combo. It's a combo of toasted and untoasted chips to duplicate a barrel fermentation in the tank with the lees-stirring. But I encourage my client winemakers to try each and every alternative that comes along and see what each supplier has got. There are some great oak tannin extracts coming out of Europe, too.

W&V: Oak alternatives still don't have much consumer acceptance. Is there anything that wineries or winemakers can do to change consumers' perceptions?

Gnekow: I didn't think so until recently, but the "green" issue may be a way to get them to accept it. If you're just using barrels, then you are cutting down a lot of trees for a bunch of barrels that are generally tossed and used as firewood and planters after a few years. With the alternatives, you can use the whole tree. And those barrels can be used again and again with the new inserts and the newer cleaning regimes. The sustainability of forests is certainly an issue with the onset of interest in sustainable vineyard practices.