



French Barrel Makers Association: The Power of Know How

in [EVENTS](#) by [FBWorld Team](#) — February 12, 2019 at 6:30 pm |



Here we are one year away from 2020. The year both George Orwell and Isacc Asimov spent so much time fantasizing about. An era where the global population grows in leaps and bounds, and the average person is exposed to as much information in a day, as their grandparents where in lifetime.

As a Science Fiction fan and a child of the nineties I'm surprised they both completely missed the boat when it came to wine. I guess being so preoccupied with the implications of the Internets potential and how global the economy would get. People's preference as to how they spent their leisure time didn't seem like such a big deal. So let me take a moment to fill in that gap.

From the 1980's until now technology starting growing in capability and use. From there people all over the world left the fields and went to factories assembling everything from electronics to cloths. While this was going on something happened. The Global population began to get more educated and wealthy and then People from China, and other parts of Asia began passing the Mao-tai, Sojo, and Sake Aisles looking for wine. The America's began to see a surge of visitors to

Napa Valley. As a response to this wineries began springing up everywhere, and whom is everybody looking to as this transition is taking place? The French.

There are many guesses as to why this is happening, but who really knows? One thing is for sure, since so many people have access to the Internet, and the plethora of information that comes with that Brand reputation can be very fragile. Especially when stories of drama can go viral so quickly.

Now lets take a step back for a second. Why in this era of instant information and growing demand are the French being held up as the industry standard? To examine that further a good organization to talk to would be the French Barrel Makers Association.



On Friday February 1st The French Barrel Makers association held a conference in Napa. They are an organization that includes fifty companies grouped into three unions active in the harvesting of French Oak Trees, creation of New Oak Barrels, and who buys them world wide. Now forgive me for making an assumption here. I'm sure if your reading this you've scene a few tasting rooms so I don't need to go into too much detail about the demand for a craft like this at a time when the public at large can't seem to get enough wine, and the experience that comes with wine tasting.

Since 1/3 of their entire production makes its way to Napa. We are among the lucky few who get annual visits. Its fun! Get to meet all kinds of people from various parts of Europe offering Barrels, grown and harvesting in France. Even though there were a few language barriers. The people working in the trade from California to France to Germany had such a relationship with their craft that it has given birth to a new language. One centered on wine making, how fermentation will take place, and the effects various options of oak treatment will have on the finished product.

As you watch these guys and interpret their interactions it gets clear how important of a relationship is being formed. Wine ages anywhere from 6 months to two years in a Barrel. This Barrel affects the chemistry and is very active with the grape skins as fermentation is taking place.

Wineries today have to walk a tight balance. They need to make sure they produce what's expected of them every year, while keeping every customer happy enough to say good things about them on social media.

The average Oak French Barrel lasts ten years. Its best years are the first three; then after that it becomes neutral oak. After ten years sometimes sooner the barrel becomes moldy and can no longer be used.

Which wouldn't seem like such a big deal if you didn't consider how many barrels wineries have, more wine is being made on average year by year, and barrels are made from freshly chopped oak trees from areas around France. In all fairness the French barrel makers association do have a method for the trees to be regrown. A simple but effective method of leaving token tree every now and then as they uproot the others around, when the surviving tree starts dropping acorns the natural cycle of rebirth cycle begins.

The process from chopping down the tree to the churning out the Barrel is done in a ritualized manner, uniform standards. We are talking a religious devotion to this process in order to make sure quality standards are forever beyond reproach.

While this was an event primarily geared at building relationships between barrel makers & wineries? The press was encouraged to come and examine the process. Questions were brought up about there being enough resources to accommodate the growing demand for their product worldwide, to the practices Barrel Makers engage in that effect the taste and texture of the wine.



It was clear that when we were asking questions about their craft. Their routine was clear. There might have been some insecurity about being able to meet the rising demand especially the one rising in Asia. But they were clear Al Gore shouldn't be alarmed just yet. The forests at the moment are re growing at pace at least for now. Makes me wonder if California carried these practices would we have gotten so many fires?

It's hard to interpret everything accurately when you're on the outside looking in, but what really shined through, was the collective approach of treating Barrel Making as a Science. Carefully

planning out how the wood is to be treated so it can produce the desired traits the winemaker is aiming for. As I sit there and watch this level of cooperation I can see that Napa is influenced by France, and the reputation that is generated by these practices continues to be lived up to year after year.

Makes me curious about looking deeper into the French standard of winemaking, and what other wine regions are influenced by France? What is changing in societies around the world that is steering more and more people toward wine and what is it the French are doing that has them so ahead of everybody else?

Topics to be covered at a later date, but stay tuned updates will be broadcast over the Internet.

By Arthur Walsh



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