



Fédération des Tonneliers de France Meets in Napa

The use of barrel alternative products is expected to continue to increase, given the high cost of barrels, Marco DiGiulio, executive vice president, winemaking at Vintage Wine Estates, said recently in Napa.

“I think we’re going to see quite a bit more of barrel alternative usage. Barrels, as we all know, they’re wonderful for making very high quality world class wines,” DiGiulio said as he discussed industry trends before a group of French coopers Feb. 1. “They’re also very expensive.”

DiGiulio was among the speakers at the annual meeting of French coopers federation – or Fédération des Tonneliers de France. The meeting was the first time the federation, which represents 53 cooperages or cooperage-owned stave mills, had its annual meeting outside France.

DiGiulio gave his take on why aging wine in barrels is cost prohibitive for moderately-priced wines.

Stored barrels take a lot of space, he said. “Real estate in any wine growing region in the world, certainly in California, is very expensive,” DiGiulio added. “And so spending a lot of time and energy to build rooms to store barrels is very, very prohibitively costly.”

Using barrels also require labor. “Labor has become very, very hard to come by on the West Coast of the United States,” DiGiulio said.

In addition, baby boomers are getting older and drinking less. Younger generations do not drink as much high-quality wine as other generations did three, four decades ago.

The high-end wine market will remain strong, DiGiulio said. “We just don’t see there is going to be a lot of growth,” he said. “The growth, we feel, will come in the more moderate price points – basically \$12-20 retail.”

“At those prince points, you really cannot be using barrels,” he concluded.

Customers’ perception of oak is “the picture of a beautiful French oak barrel in a cave tucked into the hillside of the Napa Valley,” DiGiulio said. However that reality does not apply in a lot of cases, he said.

“One of the key challenges for us in the coming years is how do we craft a story that gets the consumer to understand that an alternative to a barrel is not something to be scared of,” DiGiulio also said. “How do we make it interesting? How do we make it sexy? How do we make it something that they’re happy to have? I don’t have the answer to this yet.”

Santa Rosa-based Vintage Wine Estates, which produces “less than 5 million cases” of wine a year, only uses oak barrels for its high-end production, according to DiGiulio. Five percent by volume of the wines produced sees barrel aging, DiGiulio said. The other 95 percent of the production uses either no oak or oak alternatives.

The wine produced in barrels represents 20 percent in value of all the wine Vintage Wine Estates produces, DiGiulio also said.

Other speakers included Olivier Casier, cooperage business director at Monnot SA, who discussed the latest innovations at his company which manufactures cooperage machines; Susan

Durbrow, California wineries sales manager at Riedel Crystal of America, who led a wine tasting using different styles of wine glasses; and François Lalut, chief executive officer at CITF Group, a French company based near Cognac that specializes in automation.

CITF last fall introduced to the US market Alien, a grape sorting robot at Alpha Omega winery in Rutherford. On Feb. 1, Lalut introduced a new robot named a few days later as “Woody.”

“Woody,” which is not yet in the United States, selects staves to assemble barrels. CITF is expected to attend Wine Business Monthly’s Innovation + Quality (IQ) on May 22-23 at Silverado Resort & Spa.

The Feb. 1 symposium was organized right after Unified Wine & Grape Symposium to allow members to attend both conferences.

The Fédération des Tonneliers de France members also met in closed session on Feb. 1 before attending the afternoon presentations. The agenda included updates on labor shortages and work on contamination risk prevention and detection.

Members of the federation recalled how the California wine industry led to a rebirth of the French barrel trade beginning in the 1970s. That’s when Americans started to buy new barrels and make good wine, said Eric Barthe, chairman of the communications committee for the Fédération des Tonneliers de France, whose members produce most of France’s barrels.

“This was the new start for our federation, a new era for us – the era of aging wine in new oak,” said Barthe, who expects business to remain steady.

Today French coopers sell about 200,000 barrels to the United States – about a third of their production, according to the organization.

The Feb. 1 symposium included a gala dinner at Robert Mondavi Winery.

“I’m delighted we were able to meet here in a place that is so symbolic for our profession,” said Jean Luc Sylvain, president of the Fédération des Tonneliers de France. “Some 50 years ago, a few daring coopers crossed the Atlantic and boldly marketed their products to American winemakers. Robert Mondavi was one of the first to bet on maturing wine in French oak barrels to upmarket his wines. Today, the United States continues to be our biggest export market and represents one-third of our business.”