

Cooper looks to NW oak for barrels

By MARGARETT WATERBURY
For the Capital Press

Ask most people what wine's most important ingredient is, and they'll say grapes. Ask Rick DiFerrari, owner of McMinnville's Oregon Barrel Works, and you might get a different answer.

DiFerrari founded Oregon Barrel Works in 2000, but the company's roots go back to the managed oak forests of France, where DiFerrari learned the ancient art of coopering. After earning a degree in forestry and working in Alaska, DiFerrari took a trip to Europe in 1992, where he ended up visiting a couple of cooperages in France.

Intrigued by the intersection of forestry and viticulture, he ended up extending his trip by a year and a half, taking on an apprenticeship

at Francois Freres, a famous cooperage in Burgundy.

At Francois Freres, DiFerrari worked exclusively with French oak, but when he returned to Oregon in 1993, he started to wonder: Could he make barrels from native Oregon oak (*Quercus garryana*)? DiFerrari partnered with Francois Freres to test his idea, cutting and aging staves from Oregon oak at his own facility in Oregon and then shipping them to Demptos, a California cooperage owned by Francois Freres.

His first Oregon oak barrels hit the market in 1996 and 1997. "The initial response was really good," says DiFerrari. "A lot of people were excited about using a product grown here."

In the early 2000s, DiFerrari started building the barrels on his own, transforming Oregon Barrel Works from a



Martin Woods Winery.

Pinot noir ages in an Oregon oak barrel at Martin Woods Winery in McMinnville, Ore.

stave mill into a full-fledged cooperage. DiFerrari says working with Oregon oak is much different than working with French oak.

"The wood is really dense and hard," says DiFerrari. "It

dulls all our planers really quickly. But, in a strange way, it's easy to bend; we break very few staves. French oak is much lighter, not as dense, easier to run through equipment, but also more fragile."

The impact of Oregon oak on wine and spirits is also much different than the impact of French oak. Evan Martin, owner and winemaker at Martin Woods Winery, uses almost exclusively Oregon oak casks in his cellar, and says the wood gives wine a unique texture and mouth feel.

"There's an incredible focus and tension in the wine," says Martin. "Where the French wood is very broad, the tannins reach out to the sides and are very mouth-filling, the Oregon oak is almost like a laser focus shooting through the middle."

Brian O'Donnell, owner and winemaker at Belle Pente, uses half Oregon oak and half French oak to age his Chardonnay.

While some describe Oregon Oak as spicy and aggressive, he says its influence on

Chardonnay is actually quite refined.

"The things it imparts in Chardonnay are a little bit of hazelnut character," says O'Donnell. "It helps elevate some of the tropical characteristics we get: coconut, pineapple, mango."

This year, DiFerrari estimates he'll make about 400 Oregon oak casks, half of which will go to the wine industry and half to the spirits industry. The demand from both sides is much higher, but for DiFerrari, the drive to experiment remains his primary motivation. Now, he's starting to tinker with barrels made from other Northwest woods.

"In Astoria, when they first showed up here, they brought a cooper. They had to be using other Northwest woods," says DiFerrari. "So I'm not the first person to think of it — I'm just re-thinking it."



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