

Brewmaster Matt Van Wyck says the barrels are kept there so they won't inadvertently contaminate the other beers. "We hand-bottle these beers," Van Wyck says, "to keep the bacteria out of our main bottling line." And this series of single-batch wild and sour ales, constituting less than 1 percent of Oakshire's total production, are some of the most interesting and exciting beers in Eugene.

"To succeed as a brewery in the Northwest it used to be that you had to have a solid IPA, stout and pale ale," Van Wyck says. "The diversity and experimentation wasn't happening."

Since starting at Oakshire in 2009, Van Wyck has orchestrated dozens of single-batch beers — 20 so far this year. These one-off brews are usually made for special events, festivals, anniversaries or because an interesting or obscure ratio of malts, hops, yeasts and aging vessels is available.

But as far as these special cellar beers are concerned, "we don't really have batches that are oaked or wild," Van Wyck says. "We have about 40 barrels filled with beer. Sometimes a beer comes out unblended and sometimes we blend parts of several barrels."

The barrels, previously used in the maturation of gin, whiskey, bourbon and wine, have reached the status of "neutral" by the time they get to Oakshire. So what remains is a porous vessel.

"Each barrel is different," Van Wyck says. "The organisms in the wood are constantly conditioning the barrels." These organisms are Brettanomyces and Lactobacillus, wild yeasts that chew through sugars and are often unable to be fermented by regular Sacchromyces yeast. These yeasts provide earthy, leathery, funky, sweaty and barnyard-like aromas, while creating tart and sour aftertastes to finish the job.

This technique is similar to the way vintners utilize a secondary malolactic fermentation or a barrel-conditioning program in many wines to achieve rich and unique flavors.

It makes sense then, that Van Wyck would concoct a barrel-conditioned framboise in neutral pinot noir and cabernet barrels, then fill half of them with 42 pounds of raspberries — which, of course, also harbor wild yeast — and let the other half age until blending time in the special tank near the back door to avoid releasing the contagion to the normal beers.



"Coming soon is the best I can do," Van Wyck says. "These beers are not a consistent product year after year."

So far, Van Wyck's reserve includes two rounds of Hellshire Imperial Stout and a Skookumchuck Sour Pale Ale. We can only speculate what else he has tucked away. With different fruits and different strains of yeast, Van Wyck says that every round of cellar brew is different each time.

"As long as there's fermentable sugar, the sky's the limit," he says. ■

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