Couture Comes to Cooperage
More cooperers willing to tailor oak to winemaker specifications
By Kerry Kirkham

Tough market conditions for wineries have led cooperers to be innovative when dealing with buyer price resistance during this flat barrel economy. Cooperers are distinguishing themselves from competitors by featuring barrel-customization options tailored to their clients’ specific wine programs. From the cooperers’ points of view, custom options help keep flat barrel prices from further decline by offering added value and a higher level of customer care without additional charge. It’s like buying an individually tailored suit for an off-the-rack price.

This is a stark contrast from an era when winemakers had fewer custom options—and, in some cases, had to buy multiple barrels to reach a minimum purchase requirement. Thankfully, minimums are largely a thing of the past, and total customization is becoming more common. For winemakers with specific style goals, this is truly the ideal market.

Toast of the town
Winemakers can now select from myriad toast choices far beyond good ol’ medium toast and medium toast-plus. Jason Stout, global sales director for Cooperages 1912 in Napa, Calif., represents both T.W. Boswell and World Cooperage, which, he mentioned, has a dizzying array of 111 toast profiles. Some of these profiles can be explored on the World Cooperage website by clicking the “barrel profiling” option. Toasting profiles are categorized by grape variety and separated into French and American oak. For winemakers concerned with repeatability, profiles are tracked and charted by toasting duration and temperature. Some profiles also have detailed sensory descriptors.

Hybrid trend
Francois Pelteau-Vileneuve of Seguin Moreau Napa Cooperage reported, “By

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far, the most common custom request is American body with French heads.”
When asked if this request is driven by cost savings or style, he said that it is all
style-based.

“More winemakers are responding to consumer demands that respect the fruit,”
he said.

Standard toasting profiles range from medium to medium-plus or heavy toast
for American oak, and the heads are toasted or not, depending on the wine-
maker’s style.

According to Peltereau-Villeneuve,
“Winemakers wait until after harvest to see what their juice tastes like before they
decide on a toasting profile.” Untoasted French oak heads will contribute more oak
tannins. Toasted heads lessen the structural contributions of oak tannins, imparting
more toast flavor qualities to the wine.

Recently, Seguin Moreau received a
60-barrel order for heavy toast Ameri-
can oak bodies with heavy toast Russian
oak heads. Peltereau-Villeneuve said that
Russian oak “adds freshness to the wine.”
With a turnaround time of one day at the
cooperage, the Napa-based winemaker
could potentially rack into his custom
hybrid barrels within 48 hours.

Tailored wood
Mel Knox, a veteran barrel broker based in
San Francisco, Calif., has many customers
who buy wood futures in exchange for
the ability to dictate how the staves are seasoned
and for how long. The industry standard
for naturally seasoned, air-dried wood aging
ranges from 30 to 36 months. However, for
styles requiring softer wood tannins, some
clients request 40 months. Since there isn’t
a high demand for wood aged this long, an
initial investment is required.

Knox said that 5,000-case Rhys Vine-
yards of San Carlos, Calif., “gets four-year
air-dry from Francois Freres by buying
the wood in advance.

“We have many customers who buy their
wood in advance. Next to species, air-drying
is the most important thing to consider
in overall wood quality. This is empirically
understood by cooperers,” Knox said.

Rhys Vineyards purchases uncoopered
stave wood that has been air-dried for
four full years in Burgundy. According
to the winery’s website, barrel decisions
are made with two goals in mind: “very
consistent barrels year after year, and
wines that are differentiated entirely by
the vineyard and not by the barrel. The
resulting barrels are extremely gentle and
help raise our wine with pure fruit rather
than noticeable oak flavor.”

Jeff Brinkman, winemaker at Rhys, re-
minded that there are no cost savings in this
approach; it is practiced purely for style.

“There are less obvious oak influences,
providing mid-palate texture and lift for
the fruit. It’s tough nowadays, but we put
our order in four years in advance, and we
pay for a percentage up front at the current
euro rate and pay a cooperage fee at the
time of cooperage.” Brinkman feels that if
more four-year aged wood were readily
available, it would be more popular.