



06/16  
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## Taking Care of your Barrels

### **New Barrels**

At the time of manufacture, the wood in a new barrel typically will have 11-13% moisture by weight. Occasionally if the weather is rainy in the wood aging yard, a barrel may end up with 15% or more moisture. Either way, in a hot dry climate (like California), a barrel can dry out before it's filled. You'll see gaps between staves and tapping on the heads will make a snare drum sound. Here's how to prevent problems-

When you receive your barrels, check them over. Although it's good to leave the wrapping in place until you're ready to use the barrel, try to check for obvious shipping damage. Store the barrels in the coolest and dampest place you have available. Then, a day or two before you're ready to fill it, add several gallons of chlorine free water, slosh it around and stand the barrel on one head. If no leaks, flip it and soak the other head. If there's some seeps, let the water stand until the barrel is tight, typically a couple of hours or overnight.

If you don't have a cool moist storage area, the best option is to fill the barrels with a holding solution. Yes, it will take a little of the oak character but the barrel will stay sound. Fill the barrel partway with clean chlorine free water. For a 60 gallon (225L) barrel, dissolve and add 45 grams of Potassium Metabisulfite and 180 grams of Citric Acid (both are available at any winery or brewery supply store). Then top up the barrel. The metabisulfite releases sulfur dioxide into the water and the Citric Acid increases the amount of SO<sub>2</sub> in solution by lowering the pH of the water. This solution will keep the barrel sound and clean as long as you remember to top up the barrel with plain water every couple of weeks. When you're ready to use the barrel, empty and rinse twice; then fill with wine.

### **Used Barrels**

The above notes apply to used barrels as well as new, but there are extra considerations with barrels that have seen wine. As soon as the barrel is emptied, unwanted bacteria will begin to flourish, particularly Acetobacter which will form acetic acid (VA) in the wood where wine has penetrated. Although all wines have trace amounts of VA, a contaminated barrel can increase VA to levels that render the barrel useless for wine. If your storage area is cool and moist, rinse the barrel with clean chlorine free water and burn some sulfur in the barrel which will release SO<sub>2</sub> and keep the barrel sweet. We sell sulfur sticks and disks and can help you figure how much to use. Alternatively, you can use the holding solution described above. If you gas the barrel, you need to check it REGULARLY. As long as you can smell SO<sub>2</sub> and the barrel looks and sounds tight, you're OK. However, if you smell any VA or other off aromas, rinse and re-sulfur the barrel right away.

If you think you have a microbial problem with a used barrel, we have an oxygen based bleach that will help clean up small amounts of contamination; call us for details.

Finally, make sure you've got the necessary ancillary items- don't forget bungs, a burner to hold your sulfur so that no drips get into the barrel and a scale if you're using metabi and citric. If you live in an area with bore beetles like California (they love wine soaked wood and make tunnels the size of a toothpick), you might consider a coating that helps prevent attacks. Do you need racks or stands for your barrels? Feel free to call with any questions or considerations and have fun making great wine.

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