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## Thoughts and Observations from UC Davis' Wine Flavor 101B: All about Oak

By Jason Fernandez

February 10, 2017 was a field trip for the Barrel Builders Sales Force. An early-morning drive over the back roads to Lake Berryessa with Phil Burton is a trek through local history, fauna and flora not to be missed!

The morning started smoothly with an easy registration, and more importantly, coffee and breakfast nosh. As any conference attendee knows, coffee is critical. My compliments to Anita O., Kay B., and the army of student who organized and executed this event.

About ten years ago, I felt that some of these discussions and presentations fell a little flat. Not specific to this venue by any means, there was a run of presentations and "technical papers" that ended something to the effect of "our results are only specific to our grapes and conditions and the experiment and conditions need to be expanded across a variety of variables for conclusive results". Not much useful information to take away.

Fast forward a few years, and this day of seminars definitely put me in my place: the panel Speaker were well-spoken and made concise presentations of their work. Each presentation provided valuable, consumable technical information which and built upon on other presentations.

Following an opening presentation about the composition and flavor compounds of untoasted to toasted oak by Tom Collins from WSU, Linda Bisson provided each participant received (15) microcentrifuge tubes a guided sensory tour of the oak and toasting product compounds. This presentation of Methyl Octalactone, Eugenol and Guaiacol, where they come from and where they refreshed my whole perspective of oak and wine!

The morning was rounded out by an industry panel of representatives from Radoux, Laffort, Cooperages 1912, Enartis USA, and Vivelys. Each presented aspects of oak alternative product formats, benefits, production methods and methodology, and what each is trying to provide for the winemaking customer.

Following a healthy and sensible lunch (below the food-coma threshold), Phil Burton and Heather Burton took to the stage to present the what, how, and why of barrel maintenance. The real "why" is simply wine quality: take care of your barrels and they will take care of you! Secondly, barrels are a winery investment therefore, make the very most of that investment. The "what and how" is maintenance that any handy Cellar Operator can perform do in-house; how-to videos of repairs and maintenance tips are posted are at [BarrelBuilders.com/resources](http://BarrelBuilders.com/resources).

The afternoon culminated in a variety of winemaker presented in-house commercial trials.

Each of these were well presented and offered take-away results that were practical and applicable:

- Relative sensory contributions of American & French Oak in 15-month Napa Cabernet;
- Dark versus Light toast French Oak in South Napa Chardonnay in a specific flavor profile, market-driven wine. What works, in what percentages.
- Barrel expression in Sonoma Pinot noir in first and second fill vintages.
- Finally: a highly distinguished Alexander Valley producer presenting Cabernet in Medium and Medium Plus toasts American Oak.

Each of these comparison experiments were well expressed, executed, and presented, and gave me a refreshed perspective on what oak has to contribute to wine. My compliments to each of the presenters and the cellar staff who executed and managed on a weekly basis. Let's keep the discussion going and see what techniques practices can be developed to respect and contribute the most to the traditional craft of winemaking.

Visit the [Barrel Builders Resource Page](#) to see Phil's lecture at the 'All About Oak' Symposium.



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