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Are acacia barrels the future for white wine?



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Jane Anson considers the merits of going oak-free and ageing white wine in acacia barrels...

Are acacia barrels best for white wine? Credit: Thomas Martinsen / Unsplash

I started off the new year with a tasting that was, I was told, a world first. A line up of 22 wines from seven countries, all white or rosé, dry and sweet, that had been aged in acacia barrels rather than in oak. It was certainly a first for me.

It was organised by Tonnellerie du Sud Ouest (TSO), a cooperage based in Gaillac, in southwest France. It's an area with a history of using acacia barrels and currently the company sells 80% of its acacia barrel production overseas, with demand growing each year.

'We've seen an explosion of interest in acacia recently,' Baudouin de Montgolfier of TSO tells me. 'As the trend for less obviously oaked wines grows, producers are looking for ways to maintain mouthfeel without getting toasty, overly spicy or sweet vanilla flavours. Acacia offers a way to do that.'

'I think of it as a super sub,' says wine consultant Marc Dworkin, who works with acacia barrels at Château Mihope in **Ningxia**, China, among other places. 'It doesn't work with every style, and doesn't give the tannic structure for most reds, but it over-performs in certain conditions. It offers texture and mid-palate weight without drowning the wine in the process,' he explains.

Alternatives to oak have been around for, well, as long as barrels have. Historically producers might have used cherry, mulberry, redwood, chestnut, ash or even pine, depending on what was available locally.

French acacia, known also as black locust (*robinia pseudoacacia*), is actually native to the United States and was introduced into Europe in the 1600s. Even today it represents a tiny proportion of the French barrel industry, but it has several advantages for producers, not least the fact that it's slightly cheaper than oak barrels (\$470 compared to \$650 with coopers Artisan Barrels, for example).

The French acacia forests used by TSO are also used as sources for oak – so mainly in the north and northeast, along the Vosges mountains, in the Jura, Alsace and Franche-Comté.

Unlike oak, acacia trees can be sawed rather than split into staves, because they don't have the same issue of grain that needs to be followed. The occasional knot in the wood is not such a big deal either, and it grows quicker, reaching a useable size in 80 to 120 years, unlike 200 years for French oak, which makes them a little more sustainable. Although currently there is less of it around, so it's a little harder to source than oak.

Drawbacks of acacia include colour leeching – I found a number of wines with a rich yellow colour that was a little at odds with expectations for a young dry white, although the **Sauvignon Blanc** and **Riesling** seemed to avoid this problem, so perhaps it's linked to acidity levels. It is also harder for coopers to work with because the toasting level needs to be very carefully controlled and kept extremely light for best results.

Having said that, acacia seems particularly well-suited to the ageing of white wines, mainly because its personality is less marked than oak can be, giving space to the grape variety and a host of other site-specific characteristics.

For a true comparison, it would be necessary to try these samples aged in the same proportions of acacia against oak, whereas we tasted finished wines that had used varying amounts – from 5% to 100% acacia, to a 50/50 mix of acacia and oak. So I'm not claiming this is a scientifically robust study but there did seem to be a number of wines with heightened floral notes, alongside clear citrus. I was less impressed with the acacia barrels that had been well-toasted, the result seemed to be sweet toffee or even bacon, while others had some wet straw character, rather than the smoky, grilled edge of toasted oak.

Overall there were a number of excellent wines and none that you would say were overly dominated by the character of the wood. In Bordeaux right now, Châteaux Carbonnieux, Yquem, La Louvière and Pressac (where this tasting was held) are trialing the impact of acacia, as are several rosé producers in Provence – who are also attracted by the potential for mouthfeel without intrusive flavours – as are Weingut Pfaffl and Nimmervoll, both in Austria.

'No one wants their wine to seem over-made any more,' says Dworkin 'And acacia might just be ready to step into the breach'.

Wines aged in acacia barrels:

Klein Constantia, Vin de Constance, Constantia, 2014

One of the great sweet wines of world, this is utterly delicious with a perfect balance of tension and succulence. Gently-spiced rich lemon meets lime zest and zinging minerality, along with soft white pepper notes that help to elongate the palate. 95% one-fill oak and 5% acacia. POINTS 97

Klein Constantia, Blocks 361 & 372 Sauvignon Blanc, 2015

From individual blocks of Sauvignon Blanc, the complexity here is more evident than in the Metis right from the first nose. Great stuff from winemaker Matthew Day. It's floral-edged, with a gorgeous minerality and clear concentration of flavours. The palate is well structured, slightly smoky, and has volume through the ... POINTS 94

Quivira Vineyards, Sonoma County, Dry Creek Valley, Wine

An estate in north Sonoma that has been working with acacia barrels for around 20 years, here ageing its Sauvignon Blanc in 65% new barrels. This is a delicious wine with great structure, well balanced with fleshy white peach and lifted by tighter lemongrass notes. It works extremely well, and ... POINTS 92

Klein Constantia, Metis Sauvignon Blanc, Constantia, 2016

This is one of the dry wines of Klein Constantia and is excellent quality. It's structured and sappy with clean minerality and flavours of slate, fresh citrus, lime and white pear. From a cool valley spot in Constantiaberg, this was apparently inspired by Pascal Jolivet in Sancerre, and it certainly ... POINTS 92

Château de Fieuzal, Pessac-Léognan, Cru Classé de Graves,

A classic Fieuzal white in that it has a richness and is extremely gourmet, although perhaps a little overly marked by oak. It's such a different style of white wine here in Pessac, it's almost impossible to find the link with basic Bordeaux Blanc. Fleshy apricot notes, lovely citrus and ... POINTS 92

Arba Wine, Assa Valley, Kazakh Riesling, Almaty, 2014

This is lovely, with clear touches of floral honey, lychee and bouncing acidity. From a fully organic winery with very low sulphur use, at 2,500m above sea level in south-east Kazakhstan. It's a cold location with amazing biodiversity, where vines have to be buried in winter as in Ningxia. Kazakh ... POINTS 91

King Family Vineyards, Monticello, Loreley, Virginia, 2006

A Vin de Paille from Petit Manseng grown in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It has extremely high aromatics which end slightly abruptly. There's a lovely silkiness through the mid-palate, with concentrated sweet and sour flavours of apricot, saffron and honeysuckle. It has good acidity, but shows some bitterness on the ... POINTS 91

Domaine La Cavale, Luberon, Rhône, France, 2017

Grenache Blanc can be austere when young but here they have done an excellent job of preserving the varietal character while giving it a rich structure and mouthfeel. It's well balanced, with good grip and personality. Aged in 30% acacia barrels and 70% stainless steel. Organically farmed, with certification due ... POINTS 91

Montinore Estate, Willamette Valley, L'Orange, Oregon, 2016

This is an excellent wine: Muscat fermented on its skins, with clean, well-defined flavours of mandarin, citrus and touches of bitter chocolate. Spicy, with good acidity. POINTS 90

Château de Pressac, Rosé de Pressac, Bordeaux, France, 2017

This has lovely juicy raspberry and redcurrant flavours, with good persistency and richness of structure. It holds on tightly through the palate, giving good impact and personality for a rosé that sets it apart from the fresher Provence style. It's aged for four months in 500-litre acacia barrels, 100% new, ... POINTS 90

Domaine Rotier, Gaillac, Southwest France, France, 2016

Alain Rotier was one of the first winemakers I visited on moving to France in 2003, and I have always enjoyed the extremely unusual Len de l'El (or Loin de L'Oeil) variety, so I was happy to see this wine in the line up. Gaillac is one of the historical ... POINTS 89

Marianne Wines, Simonsberg, Sauvignon Blanc, 2017

Christian Dauriac, a doctor as well as a Bordeaux vineyard owner, also has this lovely property in Simonsberg, between Paarl, Franschoek and Stellenbosch. The wine has a touch too much sulphur evident on the nose right now as it was only recently bottled, but it passes with a swirl to ... POINTS 89

Montinore Estate, Willamette Valley, White & Gray, 2016

The colour is a little darker than you might expect from the grapes, although it's very good. This is soft and floral, with a slight jasmine, or even wet straw, edge. Aged in 80% new 500-litre acacia barrels. POINTS 88

Château Mihopé, Helan Mountain East, Chardonnay, 2017

I visited this estate in Ningxia, China, a year or so ago, so I'm happy to see this in the lineup. Its French wine consultant, Marc Dworkin was also at the tasting. This has a smooth mouthfeel with an expanding mid-palate that carries weight through to the end, together ... POINTS 88

Buitenverwachting, Maximus, Constantia, South Africa, 2014

This winery is located on the east-facing slopes of Constantiaberg and originally formed part of the Constantia Estate. The wine has caramel notes on the attack, with a silky texture. It's certainly gourmet and impactful, but for me the roundness masks the fruit a little too much. Aged in 30% ... POINTS 87

Cave des Grands Crus, Mâconnais, Pouilly-Fuissé, 2016

This is good, with a round mouthfeel and a rich lemon and honey character with smoked almond notes. Not huge tension compared to many Chardonnays, but approachable, easy to drink and enjoyable. 100% acacia ageing, 60% new. POINTS 87

Hillsborough Vineyards, Opal, Virginia, USA, 2015

Petit Manseng has become an increasing presence in Virginia over recent years. Here it has been fermented dry but it still maintains a rich, round mouthfeel with citrus and traces of hazelnut. The grape itself is richly coloured, and the acacia barrel (500-litre, to reduce impact) has also passed some ... POINTS 86

Txomin Etxaniz, Txakoli de Getaria, TX, País Vasco, 2017

This is from an estate in northwest Spain near Hondarribia in Basque Country. It uses a grape that's naturally high in acidity, balanced here with a slightly smoky caramel finish. I'm not sure that it works fully, although it certainly has a distinctive character. Fermented with natural yeasts on the ...