

Quick Guide

Chapter 13.

Ageing. The role of wood.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THERE?

- Let's take it in stages: The aim of ageing is merely to provide the wine with certain different characteristics.
- The ageing process takes place first in the barrel (oxidative stage) and then in the bottle (reductive stage).
- Barrel ageing helps great wines to express their rich, smooth, rounded and fine qualities. In addition to enhancing aromas, the barrel, as it's porous, also allows a moderate amount of oxygen in, thereby smoothing out tannins, stabilising the colour and contributing to a longer, more controlled maturing (oxidative stage).
- Inside the barrel, the wine develops: the violet colour of young reds turns into a russet or ruby red and wines aged for a long time even take on a yellowish tinge. The colour of whites also goes from straw yellow to deep gold. On the other hand, rosés will lose some of their liveliness and intensity when aged.
- After ageing in the barrel, the wine continues to evolve in the bottle (reductive stage), where it gains in complexity and achieves its utmost expression, this time due to the absence of oxygen.

THE PROCESS

- Before the barrel is filled, it's a good idea to remove the oxygen it has accumulated and remove any microbes. This is done by burning the inside with sulphur. Once ready for action, it should be filled little by little, making sure the wine doesn't foam.
- Once full, the barrel must be sealed with a cork covered with silicone, glass or wood. Afterwards the barrels are piled up and arranged in rows in the part of the cellar with the lowest temperature and highest humidity. These conditions help to ensure correct oxidation, slow and even, and to reduce the loss of liquid through evaporation.
- Racking should take place every six months. This consists of moving the wine to a different barrel to separate it from any sediment that has settled at the bottom.
- When it is considered that the wine has reached the desired point, it is clarified, filtered and bottled.

THE BARREL

- The size and origin of the barrel give the wine different aromatic nuances. By way of example, French oak, the most classic type, will provide more natural, spicy wood notes, such as cloves; on the other hand American oak typically adds exotic aromas such as coconut, vanilla, chocolate... the aromatic contribution depends on how toasted the barrel is.
 - Not all that glitters is oak... Other woods have also been used throughout history, such as chestnut, acacia or cherry, although it's generally agreed that oak is the most appropriate for ageing wine.
 - It's true that we always hear about French and American oak but it's only fair to point out that oak from Eastern Europe is becoming increasingly popular.
 - Size does matter! The larger the barrel, the less wine will be in contact with the wood, so a 300-litre barrel will add fewer aromatic nuances than a 225-litre barrel.
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