

CHEVALLIER

JULY 2021

aging
vessels



aging vessels

WINEMAKING is nothing more

than the cumulation of a series of decisions on the part of the grower. What grape varieties, rootstocks, and where to plant them? How to farm them? What day to harvest?

As much as any decision about grapes, viticulture, and harvest, the choice of aging vessel has an all-important impact on the final product. Thousands of years ago, around the genesis of winemaking, the answer might have been obvious: stomp on the fruit for a bit, then toss the must into clay amphorae and leave the rest to the gods. But times have changed, and today vignerons have a seemingly endless array of possibilities when it comes to raising their wines. Oak barrels, popularized in Roman times, were originally prized for their light weight (compared to amphorae) and the relative ease with which they could be shipped overseas. But now oak is valued more for its impact on the wine held inside, like the flavor it imparts and the amount of oxygen it allows to come in contact with the wine. Certain regions traditionally relied on other woods, such as chestnut or acacia, which offer different qualities than oak and are beginning to come back in fashion. Amphorae—terra cotta or sandstone—are also enjoying newfound popularity in natural wine circles and

with producers seeking to emulate ancient methods. Then there are the so-called inert containers: stainless steel, concrete, glass, fiberglass . . . all of which offer distinct pros and cons of their own.

Aging vessels impact many aspects of a wine as it rests before bottling. Some offer logistical advantages, such as the temperature control afforded by stainless steel. Tanks with floating caps can be filled to a custom capacity, whereas other vessels come in standard sizes that may not be suited to small batches of wine. The characteristic flavor of a vessel, namely wood, marries better or worse with a given wine's inherent aromatic palette—white Burgundy would not be white Burgundy without the toasty, buttery contribution of small French oak *barriques*. Furthermore, permeability is crucial, as oxygenation accelerates a wine's aging process.

Aging is a period of refinement, when rough edges soften and the young aromas of freshly fermented grape juice evolve into something more complex and vinous. It's no coincidence this period is known in French as *élevage*, during which the producer "raises" their beloved wine like a child before making the difficult decision that it is ready to go out into the world.

—ANTHONY LYNCH



CONCRETE TANK

PROS: Aromatically neutral ♦ Thick walls provide thermal inertia ♦ Similar permeability to wood

CONS: Heavy and hard to install ♦ Hard to maintain
♦ Hard to set to desired temperature



CONCRETE EGG

PROS: Shape allows for constant motion of lees during fermentation ♦ Promotes creamy mouthfeel
♦ Aromatically neutral

CONS: Can standardize mouthfeel of some wines ♦ Heavy ♦ Lees motion can promote reduction



STAINLESS STEEL

PROS: Preserves fresh fruit characteristics ♦ Comes in many sizes ♦ Easy to control temperature ♦ Easy to clean

CONS: Wines can feel hard or angular ♦ Promotes reductive character ♦ Solids tend to stay in suspension



SMALL OAK BARRELS

PROS: Easy to find new or used ♦ Oxygenation softens wines ♦ Wood tannins add structure and weight

CONS: Flavors (vanilla, toast) and tannins can dominate wine ♦ Variable in quality ♦ Prone to microbiological contamination



ACACIA CASK

PROS: More subtle flavor than oak (floral) ♦ Larger size imparts fewer wood notes ♦ Less permeable than oak

CONS: Harder to find ♦ May be better suited to whites than reds ♦ May impart yellowish color