

# CONTAINERS

by Frank Deis

We tend to take containers for granted. Wine comes in a bottle or a jug, or even a box, and most people know that the fermentation is completed in vats, or barrels, or both. But containers have changed over the years, and some of the changes have had a large effect on the taste of the wine.

Barrels are more than 2,000 years old. It appears that they appeared in the region of the Alps during the Iron Age. Of course there are various types of barrels, and the easiest to make are "loose" barrels used for storing dry goods. It is a much more exacting art to make "tight" barrels which can hold liquids without leaking, and in fact wine was not often aged in barrels 2,000 years ago. The typical large container was the "amphora," and many amphorae have been recovered from old shipwrecks and other archaeological sites. It can be a little hard to imagine how these were used, because they had a pointy bottom, looking something like the Ace of Spades upside down. "♠" They were fired from clay, which made them hard and durable and strong, but the structure of ceramics can allow slow leakage of the contents. Today we glaze the interior of pottery if it is supposed to be watertight. Back then, they coated it with pine pitch or resin. This waterproofing added extra flavors to the wine. In Greece, one of the most popular white wines is "Retsina" which has a flavor which must be about the same as wine 2,000 years ago, which had been stored in the original amphorae. In a sense this wine is a "fossil" of an abandoned practice.

It is said that the Chinese were more impressed with barrels than any other example of European technology. In winemaking, there are some barrels that are designed to be small enough that one could transport them – often "small cooperage" means a 55 gallon barrel, which contains about as much liquid as a typical fish tank. There are also large stationary barrels which are used as vats. In parts of Italy, the large "botte" are made from the local chestnut trees and re-used again and again for winemaking. This kind of barrel has little effect on the final flavors in the wine.

Fans of California wine soon learn to look for certain elements in the bouquet which can reveal information about the wooden barrels, if any, used to make the wine. When wine is aged in small barrels of American Oak, it can often have a scent which is very reminiscent of freshly sharpened pencils. If the winemaker is ambitious enough, he may send off to France and buy barrels of Limousin Oak, which give more of a vanilla scent to the wine. Also the barrels are frequently "toasted" which can add smoky toasted elements to the bouquet. Smaller, newer barrels impart more flavors than older, larger barrels. The volatile chemicals in the oak can be "used up" by winemaking. Naturally using new oak barrels every time will add significantly to the price of the wine. One winemaker, Hogue, makes all of its wines in steel vats, preserving the character of the grape and saving a lot of money as well!

Modern bottles with a cylindrical shape to allow for horizontal storage have contributed greatly to the concept of aging wine. With a sound cork, many red or sweet wines can last 50 years and taste great. Many of the better wines require at least a decade or two of aging just to taste the way they were designed to taste. "Good" wines are often very harsh and unpleasant when they are young.