

Brandy Barrels

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"Brandy" comes from the Dutch "brandewijn" or "burned wine." It has been a popular drink for more than 400 years, and its production is slowly spreading in California.

The barrel of choice for small California brandy makers is French Limousin oak. It's not just out of respect for tradition. The porous, looser grain of Limousin wood gives the brandy the degree of breathing it needs for optimum aging.

Hubert Germain-Robin, co-founder and brandy master at **Germain-Robin** in Ukiah, California, insists that his barrels all be air dried for three years. Brandy sinks deeper into the wood than wine does, and Germain-Robin wants to ensure that all greenness is gone from the wood, to avoid the bitterness it can produce.

Standard barrel size for Germain-Robin's brandy is 350 liters, about 92 gallons. Again, as with the type of wood, the size is traditional; the same as used in Cognac. But that tradition isn't just a result of sentimentality. That size of barrel strikes an optimal balance between the faster aging of a small barrel and the lower surface exposure of a larger barrel.

New brandy goes into new oak for 9-12 months, then into older barrels. Long-term aging is done in barrels that are at least two years old. Aging room temperatures vary from 45 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit, with a relative humidity of 75 to 85 percent.

To bring the alcohol content down to 40 percent from its initial 65-70 percent, the brandy is diluted with water. Some brandy makers use distilled water, but Germain-Robin uses pure rainwater, finding it soft and sweet and perfect for dilution.

Germain-Robin has experimented with a wide variety of grapes but has currently settled on Pinot Noir, French Colombard and Semillon. He has also experimented with other woods, including Hungarian and American, but has stayed with the French.

Alison Schneider, brandymaker (and winemaker and champagne maker) at nearby **Jepson Vineyards**, also uses Limousin, along with Allier. As does Germain-Robin, she favors a medium plus toast, the preference of the majority of other winemakers as well. Jepson uses about 20 percent new barrels each year. The rest will be as old as ten years. All of the grapes for their brandy are French Colombard.

Schneider finds brandy much more finicky about blending than wine. As she says, "It's like a single person who lives in their own space for a long time, and then tries to live with someone else. It takes a while to work things out." She first blends on aroma, flavors come afterwards.

An exception, in more ways than one, is the much larger **Korbel. Heck Cellars**, Korbel's brandy plant, is in the Bakersfield area of the San Joaquin Valley. Distillation and aging is done there, blending and bottling is done at Korbel's headquarters near Guerneville on the Russian River in Sonoma County.

The Heck Cellars plant produces about 400,000 cases a year and uses American oak rather than French. Korbel's head winemaker **Paul Ahvenainen** finds it better to use old oak rather than new, contrary to the approach used by most producers of wines such as Chardonnay.

Each year Korbel purchases about 12,000 whiskey barrels, 52 gallons in size. All of the barrels have been used at least one time for whiskey, mainly at the **Jack Daniels** distillery. Ahvenainen finds that brand new oak barrels are too strong, and that using old wine barrels, rather than whiskey, produces an undesirable off odor in the brandy.

Korbel's brandy is aged a minimum of two years and can be blended with batches as old as ten years or more. The brandy is sampled quarterly for tasting purposes. Korbel also produces a few hundred cases of alambic distilled brandy, sold only at its Russian River wine shop.

Some brandy producers top off their barrels as they evaporate over time; Korbel chooses not to. There's no need to worry about head space in the barrel as the high alcohol content of brandy--over 65 percent in its early stages of aging--protects it from any contamination from bacteria or other organics. Evaporation is a given; such a given that brandy makers expect to lose 2-5 percent of their product a year. In centuries past, monks making brandy termed this the "angel's share."

It is possible to affect what evaporates from the barrels by changing the humidity in the aging room. Under high humidity, more alcohol is evaporated; under low humidity, more water is lost. Both Germain-Robin and RMS Brandy say that their aging room humidity ranges between 75-85 percent.

Temperature is much less a concern with brandy than with wine. **Ansley Coale**, the other co-founder of Germain-Robin, says "Heat fluctuation is good for it. Our aging room can range from 45 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature changes cause the brandy to expand and contract, resulting in the proper breathing that allows it to age properly."

Because there is no sediment in brandy, racking for clarification is not a requirement. However, brandy is moved at various times during the course of its stay in the aging room. Brandy will be blended with other batches, likely from a variety of years, and will also be moved into large wooden vats for the slow process of dilution, bringing the alcohol content down to the usual 40 percent that consumers favor.

At **RMS Brandy**, owned by parent company **Rémy Martin**, cellarmaster **Rick Estes** works with six varieties of grapes for his brandies: French Colombard, Pinot Noir, Chenin Blanc, Palomino, Muscat and Folle Blanche.

After distillation, the brandy experiences three levels of barrel aging, all in French Limousin. The recently distilled *eau-de-vie* goes first into new 90-gallon barrels. The RMS barrel house has a constant temperature of 60 degrees Fahrenheit and a relative humidity of 80 to 90 percent. In fact, the distillery's Carneros location at the foot of the Napa Valley was chosen as an ideal spot to naturally maintain these temperature and humidity levels.

After 18 months, Estes moves the brandy into 4-12 year old barrels. Final aging is in RMS's oldest oak barrels, which can be up to 70 years of age. They're one of the few California brandymakers that has age-specific brandies. Their brandies currently range from seven to 14 years of age.

RMS uses traditional hand-made alambic stills, as do Jepson and Germain-Robin, following a design that has been used for hundreds of years.

When a standard winemaker works with a batch of wine, perhaps Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon, he or she expects to end up with a quantity of bottled wine that pretty much totals up to the same quantity as the initial batch of wine, allowing for some leakage and evaporation. Because of the distillation process, a brandy maker can expect to end up with only 10-20 percent of the original amount.

As a result, Germain-Robin's Coale has a ready answer for those consumers who question why brandy is so expensive. "Imagine buying seven \$50 bottles of Pinot Noir. Throw away all but one of them. Put the remaining one in an \$800 barrel and let it sit there for 15 years before you sell it. Is brandy expensive? No, it's cheap!"

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