



A touch of

Adelaida Cellars uses oak
as a spice for their wines

By Katy Budge

At left, some of the offerings from Adelaida Cellars in Paso Robles, including Estate Pinot Noir from the HMR Estate Vineyard, the oldest Pinot Noir vineyard on the Central Coast.



spice from French oak

Historically, wine barrels initially proved themselves an efficient method of storing and transporting wine. Over centuries of winemaking, oak barrels have evolved into an important tool in the winemaking process, and their role can be understood by anyone who has ever added a spice to a recipe.

As Terry Culton, winemaker for Adelaida Cellars in Paso Robles, explained, "Oak is basically our spice rack." Like spices, the flavor profiles that barrels can impart to wine are as varied as the type of oaks that grow in particular forests, the barrel company (the cooperage), the barrel makers (the coopers), and the amount of time each barrel is fired (the toast level). Start combining all these factors, and you have a "spice rack" as varied as you'll find in any gourmet pantry.

Indeed, the parallel between chefs and winemakers is as closely tied as that of food and wine. Culton sees winemakers as "basically glorified chefs." The difference is that "chefs have to be 'on' every night, whereas we have a longer time to perform, but we only get one shot a year to be right."

To that end, Culton made a subtle, but crucial change in Adelaida's approach to winemaking when he arrived in 2003. Previous winemakers had used American oak throughout the winery, including the label's estate Pinot Noir. Reflecting his experience at Calera Wine Company, a Hollister-area winery renowned for their Pinot Noirs, Culton has shifted the entire program over to French oak.

"I certainly think American oak has its place," he said, "but not on Pinot. It's like putting cinnamon on steak – its interesting, but why? We've got beautiful Pinot here and I don't want to cover it up. I'd like to let the delicate flavors of the Pinot come through rather than adding aggressive flavors."

It is typically the more open grain structure of American oak that leads towards aggressive flavor profiles. A looser grain allows the oak flavors to come through faster and therefore show up more aggressively in the wine, character-

istics that other varietals – such as Zinfandels – can easily handle, noted Culton. The finer grained French oak barrels – from cooperages such as François Frères and French forests such as Allier and Vosges – essentially hang onto to their flavors longer.

Culton tends to prefer a light toast for Pinots for much the same reason, noting that "with a light toast, the flavors don't integrate as fast," and also favors barrels that have been air-dried for three years (meaning that the barrel staves have been left to dry in stacks for three years before being formed to barrels). The barrels with a longer drying time "don't fully integrate until about 14 months, as opposed to about 10 months, and the profiles just seem smoother."

Like most winemakers, Culton will use a variety of cooperages and toasts to create the wines he will ultimately want for blending. For example:

Comparing a 2003 Pinot Noir from the same vineyard and pressing on both Allier and Vosges light toast barrels from François Frères, the Allier offers brighter, cherry notes, while the Vosges lends a bit longer finish.

With the same comparison applied to a 2003 Mourvedre, the Vosges provides bright raspberry notes, with the Allier giving much darker cherry tones.

A 2003 Syrah on François Frères medium toast Vosges shows elegant oak structure, while the same Syrah on François Frères Hungarian medium toast offers more flavors in the mid-range.

Obviously, a new barrel of any kind will exhibit more flavor than a barrel in its second or third usage, and that is why winemakers will refer to the percentage of "new oak" or "neutral oak" in their barrel programs. For Adelaida's Pinots, Culton uses "only about 25 percent new oak, and only 18 to 30 percent new oak throughout the winery. Oak is just an accent," he noted, "so I like to use just a little bit less rather than more. We're blessed with such wonderful limestone soils here – I like to let the terroir come through."

To those surprised that Adelaida Cellars is growing Pinot Noir in the typically hot climate of Paso Robles, it is worth noting that it was this varietal – and in fact, this particular vineyard – that first put Paso Robles on the world's winemaking map.

Dr. Stanley Hoffman planted his Pinot Noir vineyard in 1963, and as such the HMR Estate Vineyard is the oldest Pinot vineyard in either San Luis Obispo County or Santa Barbara County. Hoffman teamed up with the venerable André Tchelistcheff in 1973, and their 1975 HMR Pinot finished third over a few highly rated French red Burgundies.

The HMR Estate Vineyard was purchased by the Van Steenwyk family in 1994 after they acquired Adelaida Cellars, and as a result, the stellar HMR tradition continues.

For more information about Adelaida Cellars, call 805-239-8980, or log onto www.adelaida.com.

The tasting room is open daily 11-5 at 5805 Adelaida Road in Paso Robles.