



Clay's Trip to the Culinary Institute of America, Greystone Campus
St. Helena, California, Napa Valley
Mastering Wine I

Installment Two

Morning of day two of the Mastering Wine class was spent learning about Oenological techniques (wine-making) and what they do for wine. This was followed by a field trip to the Franciscan Winery to do barrel tastings of chardonnay and to learn from the wine maker how blending of barrels of different wine techniques and vinyards produces a wine style for a winery. We even tasted the lies (lees). They were opaque and very acidic. Wines aged "sur lie" (on the old yeast cells from fermentation) pick up a creamy texture and some yeastiness in the taste. Most champagne is made this way. Malolactic fermentation is a bacterial fermentation in which malic acid is changed to lactic acid. A byproduct is diacytl which gives the wine a buttery flavor. It also gives wine a smoothness and reduces the acidity level. All red wine and some white wine go through malolactic fermentation.

Back at the classroom we tasted chardonnay from around the world as well as California. We learned how different sources of oak for barrels and whether the barrels have been charred inside (toasted) determines the flavor they impart. By aging "sur lie," allowing malolactic fermentation to take place and using old or new barrels that have been toasted or not, wine-makers have a huge range of flavors and styles for making a wine. Add to that the soil and climate where the grapes are grown, the possibilities are almost infinite. A consumer should be able to find a wine to fit their style preference in a number of labels.

A barrel costs between \$800 and \$900 and does not last infinitely. Barrels made by hand are heated and toasted to bend the wood of the staves. The charring adds flavor to wine, but only for about 4 years. The barrels are then said to be neutral. A barrel can be recharred, but it loses strength, so it isn't often done. Americans use mechanization and don't often toast their barrels. American oak, made into barrels using French cooperage processes, impart the most flavor to a wine. The most common marker of American oak that has been toasted is vanilla.

On day three we talked about viticultural methods and vine selection. Vines that naturally grow a lot of vegetation are said to have high vigor. Those with little vegetation have low vigor. A viticulturalist tries to choose vines and soils that will produce the type of wine they want to make. Sauvignon Blanc is a good example of a high vigor vine. They are usually grown on the poorer soils at higher elevations, and even then, the vines are often pruned to force fruit development. Pinot Noir has low vigor and is usually grown on the better soils to try to get a good production. Knowledge of vigor can help consumers understand why certain types of wine are more expensive than others.