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TONNELLERIE BILLON



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There was a time when barrel-making was a strictly local business. Being a cooper you had to be close to your customers and therefore the cooperages were located in the wine-making regions. Today the market has changed. The cooperages are still located in the wine-regions, but a large portion of what they produce end up elsewhere. Tonnellerie Billon in Beaune sells 75 percent of their production on the export market. The remaining 25 percent either stay in the Burgundian cellars or are sold to winegrowers in other parts of France.

– The export market really began in the early 1980's with the American market, explains Vincent Damy at Tonnellerie Billon. At this time it was difficult for a small artisan cooperage to move into the US market. Since then

we have teamed up with Vincent Bouchard and his team, who act as our agent in a big part in our export markets.

You find Tonnellerie Billon east of the centre of Beaune, in the industrial zone of Vignolles, between the railway and the Paris-Lyon motorway. It was founded in 1947 by Gaston Billon. At the time he worked alone and was mainly doing repair work. Thirteen years later he was joined by his son Jacques. It was also around this time that production of barrels began.

In 1995 Vincent Damy took over as director. He is the third generation in a family of coopers. His brother Jérôme Damy runs Tonnellerie Damy in Meursault. Today Tonnellerie Billon employs 24 people and has an annual output of 10 000 barrels.



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– I have always liked manual work in general, says Vincent Damy, and I was always imbued with work by my grandfather and father. During the school holidays I liked to go to the cooperage to help a little. Coopering is a physical but prestigious job. It is very gratifying, at the end of the day, to see a quality product that you have created and to know that this product soon will contain a great wine.



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The Romans began to use barrels in the 3rd century, as a result of their commercial and military contacts with the Gauls, who had been making barrels for several centuries. Thanks to this the use of barrels spread more widely across Europe. Throughout the centuries the design has remained very much the same. Machines have made life easier for the cooper, even if it is still very much of manual work involved. The big change has been the purpose of using barrels.

– Previously the barrels were only used for storing the wine, says Vincent Damy. Now it is a tool to create the wine. The winemaker must choose a good barrel to create a good wine just as he or she must use the best techniques and other tools such as oenology, corks and vineyards practices. Therefore he or she will prefer a certain size of barrel, or a certain toast or origin of barrel. A barrel therefore is really tailor-made and we must be very responsive to the desires of our customers so that they are satisfied. Each barrel is made according to specific requests of the customers. Personally or through sales and marketing people, we are very close to our customers.

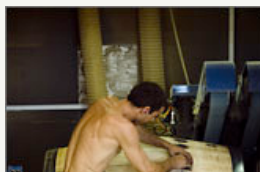
– Oak, depending on its geographical origin, will have more or less tight grains. Also, the quality of the soil is important. Depending on what elements the soil contains, the oak is going to grow more or less quickly. In tasting certain wood with fine grains will give the wine a more supple body and nice, complex aromas, while oak with more open grains will give the wine a little more tannins a richer, fuller body. This is a generalization and can create different results with different grapes.



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There are about one hundred cooperages in France today. Together these employ some 400 coopers and the total annual production is 500 000 barrels. As is the case with Tonnellerie Billon a large portion of this – 80 percent – is being exported.

Vincent Damy is optimistic about the future for the coopers. When it comes to the use of oak in wine fashion has steered away from over-oaked, heavy wines.



– The future for coopering is once again bright, he says. The use of wood was at one time very important, with a large market for heavily toasted wines. Now wood is used more subtly, not to toast them but rather to support them and accompany them to acquire the nectar – depth and richness – wanted by the oenologist or winegrower. This can be seen both



in France and in the export markets. It is more interesting for us now.

– The ideal barrel, for me, shows a wine with subtle wood, pretty fruit and a toasting that does not stand out too much.

– In general, and that is true for the French market as well, wood is used to mark the wine very lightly – about 25-30 percent of new oak on a cuvée. A small part of our customers uses it in a more important manner – sometimes up to 100 percent – either on short aging to mark the wine, which will then be blended with wine aging in tank or even wine aging in older barrels, or for appellations which support oak. Oak is often chosen to be discreet and not to "overtaste" the cuvée; it is a support, a

jewellery case.

Tonnellerie Billon mainly works with French oak; from Central France (Allier, Cher), Vosges, Jura, Bourgogne and Fontainebleau. The large part of the production consists of the standard sized Bourgogne- (228 litres) and Bordeaux-barrels (225 litres). Then there are barrels all the way up to 700 litres, as well as custom barrels of 28,57 litres and 114 litres.

– Each day we heat up the barrels at 7AM and at 1PM, and continue the manufacturing with one part of the team while the other half prepares the barrels to heat up the following day. 60 barrels of 225/228 litres are thus finished each day. When we produce the larger barrels of 400 litres to 600 litres we obviously produce fewer each day: it takes longer for the heating process as well as the construction in general.

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