

How wine barrel cleaning can impact the ageing process

Wine Barrel Cleaning director Murray McDonald writes that thinking you have done a good job of cleaning, and getting the job done right, are two entirely different outcomes. And one of those outcomes could be bad news for your next vintage.

As you read this, many winemakers are most likely experiencing the vintage rush.

Once the grapes are ripe for the picking the winemaking process kicks into full gear.

In Australia, vintage is normally around February to April, whereas for colder climates, such as in New Zealand, June can be the peak time for vintage.

For many wineries, the ageing process is the next biggest phase in the winemaking process.

How a wine is stored and for how long depends on a number of factors including whether it's red or white, what types of grapes have been used, the wine region and specific winemaking styles.

Wine barrel cleaning is something normally pushed to the side amongst the fast-paced vintage season, but it is important to understand the way a barrel or tank has previously been cleaned will impact the quality of wine once vintage is over and the wine is placed in its vessel of choice for ageing.

Here are three key ways barrel cleaning can have an impact on the ageing processes:

1. TRAPPED OLD WINE

When many wineries think of barrel cleaning, pressure washing is normally the first method that comes to mind.

After pressure washing, hot water is another traditional factor to the wine barrel cleaning process.

However, pressure washing and hot water, although common, won't provide a "deep clean".

Hot water at 50-55C and pressure washing will take residue off the surface of a barrel, but won't completely sterilise it.

This results in old wine being trapped within the pores of oak. For a new batch of wine, this can impact the ageing process, with the old wine seeping into the new and altering the taste.

After a hot water rinse, the water can be seen to run clear, but when a method, such as high pressure and high temperature steam is dispersed through the barrel on that same barrel, the water runs with visible, stale wine.

2. YEAST AND BACTERIA

It's important your barrel cleaning method of choice doesn't just hit the surface of a barrel.

Hard to reach areas, including deep within the wood and barrel crevices can start to build up yeast and bacteria.

When the barrel becomes moist from the new batch of wine, the old built up residue then mixes in with the new batch.

A pressure washer that is hooked up

to a high temperature steam machine can ensure yeast and bacteria are blasted from crevices, and because steam is a vapour it can get deep inside the wood where water can't reach.

Many wineries have a pressure washer. To achieve this type of results, look for a steam generator that can be fitted to your existing system.

3. IT'S NOT JUST BARRELS

Stainless steel vats and tanks are also susceptible to influencing the ageing process of wine if not cleaned properly.

Tartrates and other residue substances commonly cling to the walls of a storage tank.

To ensure all residue is eliminated, without using chemicals, high temperature steam at around 130C-plus can melt tartrates and the condensation allows for it to drain out the bottom of the tank.

Although vintage is such a busy time of year, when it comes to the ageing process, you will want to have deep cleaned your barrels to ensure it is ready for your new batch of hard work.

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