

WINE

Roll out the barrels

New technology could mean the end of traditional oak casks, writes **Jeni Port**.

FOR a winemaker to consider the demise of the wine barrel — well, it's unheard of.

It goes against the natural wine order that for generations has deemed that the winemaker crushes the grapes, ferments the juice and then transfers it to an oak barrel to mature and gain flavours and tannins.

But what if winemakers could utilise top-end oak for their wine that didn't come in the conventional barrel shape, was cheaper and more environmentally friendly?

Tests being carried out at some Australian wineries this year could radically change the way the wine industry — and wine drinkers — view oak.

In what is being claimed as a world first, a joint venture between Australia's Flextank and France's Oenowood International plans to source trees from the best forests in France, cut, season and mill the wood and, rather than make the oak into barrels, ship the barrel components to Australian wine producers to use as premium oak planks in their wines. They call their pseudo-barrel the BarriQ.

Oak planks — the individual planks or staves that together form a barrel — aren't new in wine. Until now they have been the rejected bits from the barrel-making process used in the production of many cheaper wines. BarriQ, it is claimed, has the ability to produce the same flavours,



Alban Petiteaux and Francois Parthon de Von are pioneering alternatives to oak barrels.

tannins and aromas as a premium wine barrel, with added benefits.

"The wine barrel is the [most] wasteful piece of rubbish in the world," says Peter Steer, from the Melbourne-based Flextank. With

wine penetrating just 4-6 millimetres of a barrel, he argues, winemakers are "throwing" 70 per cent away.

Together with Alban Petiteaux and Francois Parthon de Von, two former employees of French tonnelier Seguin Moreau, Steer is investing in the BarriQ to go inside Flextank's food-grade plastic wine tanks. The thermoplastic polymer tanks "breathe" air like a barrel, come in various shapes and sizes and have gained acceptance with many winemakers.

Could the BarriQ (bringing fla-

650-750 new barrels a year, making it one of the biggest expenses. That's a lot of money on a vessel that might be used once, twice or three times before it's sold off as a garden planter. It's also a lot to justify for wines that end up discounted on a supermarket shelf.

The BarriQ comes in a pack of eight staves, the equivalent of a half-barrel (\$401), or 16 staves, the equivalent of a full barrel (\$802). "The winemaker really just pays for the oak he needs," Steer says.

"The drive for something like this will not only come from winemakers but accountants," says Eden Valley winemaker Jim Irvine, who uses Flextanks for his Springhill merlot.

There is also the environmental question. An oak tree must be 100 to 200 years old before being cut down to make barrels.

"The best French state forests sustainably produce the equivalent of one 150-year-old tree — that is, two barrels per year — per hectare only, for a standing timber value of €500 (\$680), and 80 per cent of this wood is thrown away and often ends up in charcoal for barbecues," Petiteaux says.

But what about the taste?

Blue Pyrenees Estate winemaker Andrew Koerner, who is conducting trials into the new BarriQ in conjunction with the Flextank, was sold on the latter after his 2008 cabernet sauvignon won the trophy for the best dry red at last year's Sydney Royal Wine Show. "It started a fantastic run of wins for us," he says.

"If we crack the oak flavouring in Flextanks, if it is as good as barrels, the end result will be better than barrels because there won't be any of the variability of oak and we can actually control the level of oxygen," he says.

But not everyone is convinced. Peter Bissell at Balnaves of Coonawarra conducted two one-year trials, in 2008 and 2009, maturing cabernet in the first Flextanks.

"It didn't do what we wanted it to do," he says, which was to see if the wine was fresher than in barrel.

Then there is the romance of the barrel. It is certainly better than a plank inside a plastic tank but if you can't taste the difference, does it make a difference?

We can actually control the level of oxygen.

ANDREW KOERNER, winemaker

vours and tannins) and Flextank (bringing oxygen) combination result in the end of the barrel? It's early days yet but the way some makers regard their barrels it might just be, as one winemaker suggested, "the thin end of the wedge".

The most compelling argument for any move away from the conventional barrel is cost. Winemakers pay about \$1250-\$1300 for a new 225-litre barrique imported from France. A medium-sized Australian wine producer buys about

What the experts say

- "Oak is one of the most beautiful, beautiful aromas. It's a hedonistic, crazy, wonderful smell. When you buy a new barrel and you stick your nose in it, it's dreamy. Why would you want to move away from that when it's a beautiful thing?" Virginia Willcock, Vasse Felix
- "I can honestly see the day not too far away where I will be pulling across a great big curtain in front of all these Flextanks. The tanks are very unromantic but they deliver the same product — you know what you are getting." Andrew Koerner, Blue Pyrenees Estate
- "It will only take one, two or three winemakers to take off a top-end wine-show prize [with wine] being made with these tanks and everyone will start looking at them." Jim Irvine, Irvine Wines
- "I see no alternative to barrel at the high-quality end of wine." Phillip Moraghan, Curly Flat Vineyard
- "The barrel seems to me almost like a person's signature: unique." David Lloyd, Eldridge Estate
- "We're not contemplating moving away from the barrel." Peter Bissell, Balnaves of Coonawarra



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