

Blonde Bombshell

UNPACKING THE CRITICAL ROLE OAK PLAYS IN UNCOMPROMISING CABERNET SAUVIGNON

The ultimate secret to the oak aging of ultra-premium Cabernet Sauvignon is yielding virtually no oak influence at all, at least in terms of perceived flavor. That's the approach DAOU Vineyards is taking to its Patrimony label; for these \$275 Cabernet Sauvignons, sourced from 1,800 to 2,200-foot slopes in the Adelaida District AVA of Paso Robles, what's especially important is the exact fashion in which the barrels they go into are coopered, beginning with their source in the forests of France.

To that end, owner/winemaker Daniel Daou has enlisted the help of Tonnellerie Ô, a Benicia, California, cooperage, in handcrafting barrels exclusively for Patrimony. While Tonnellerie Ô is staffed by a team of accomplished coopers, every Patrimony barrel is personally crafted by its master cooper, Quinn Roberts. Roberts has oak-aged wine in his blood: His grandmother was Margrit Biever Mondavi; his mother, Annie Roberts, is a longtime chef at Mondavi; and his father, Keith, served as Mondavi's master cooper during its groundbreaking years in the 1970s before he went on to establish his own cooperage.

While I watched Roberts bend Patrimony barrels over open fires—brutally time-intensive, physical work that involves the precise monitoring of heat to achieve the perfect “blonde” (or



French oak staves are seasoned at DAOU for at least three years.

PHOTOS: RANDY CAPAROSO



after about 30 months in oak, when you get more the more elegant long-chain tannins, and so choice of barrels is absolutely critical. You can't do this with the wrong kind of oak.”

Daou's other goal is to achieve a sense of place. The seasoning of the staves going into his barrels plays a role in that process: The oak selected by Daou and Roberts from choice forests and mills in France are shipped to DAOU and stacked below the

Tonnellerie Ô master cooper Quinn Roberts monitors the toast on a Patrimony barrel.

“light”) toast dictated by Daou—he took time to explain the process: “Daniel’s vision of Patrimony, which is in line with our own vision as a cooperage, is to achieve a complete elegance, purity, and freshness. Yes, he always talks about the intensity of his fruit and its phenomenal phenolic content. But you notice [that] the Patrimony wines are never overly extracted, cloying, or candyish. In line with that, the oak needs to be supportive, never dominant or even really perceptible.”

Daou elaborates: “In terms of élevage, the longer you can age a wine in oak, the more flavor you can achieve. Our goal, however, is to achieve a point where wood never comes between a wine and flavor. The style of Patrimony involves dense yet smooth tannins. We’ve found that we can achieve this

winery at about 1,600 feet in elevation, ostensibly to absorb the Adelaida terroir, for at least three years.

“The first time we received the extra-tight-grained wood selected for our custom barrels, we waited five years—it was agonizing,” says Daou. “We chose to store them in a spot where there is less rain and some mid-afternoon sun. The staves are restacked twice a year to avoid mold. In the summer they’re covered by shade cloth, and we spritz non-chlorinated water on them about once a week so the wood doesn’t crack.” Ultimately, he adds, “[the] value of a Patrimony Cabernet Sauvignon is that it has its own signature, mostly to do with grapes and native yeasts found in our vineyard, but also in the oak that is seasoned right here, long before its custom coopering.” 