

Why FLX vintners make the costly choice to age wines

WRITER LAURA WINTER FALK

There are regions throughout the Old World of winemaking where law dictates the number of months that wine must age before it can be released to the market. In the region of Barolo, Italy, wine law requires a wine labeled as “Barolo” to have at least two years aging in oak and at least one year aging in the bottle prior to release. These requirements were designed to establish a level of quality throughout the region.

Aging laws do not exist in the U.S. and winemakers have the freedom to decide how long they want to invest in both barrel aging and bottle aging their wines. For the small wine producer, aging is a costly proposition. Barrel-aging beyond one year means that a barrel that could possibly be reused for the new harvest is tied up, so that another barrel needs to be purchased to replace it. Deliberate bottle-aging could mean holding an inventory of thousands of dollars in potential sales, and the possibility of creating customer frustration.

So why would a winemaker in the Finger Lakes deliberately choose to extensively age their wines in today’s challenging wine market?

When Steve Shaw of Shaw Vineyard was a young man living in Hammondsport, he made good friends with Finger Lakes vinifera pioneers like Dr. Konstantin Frank, Charles Fournier and Guy Devaux (of Gold Seal) and Hermann Wiemer. He credits these men, all of whom were trained in the Old World techniques of wine growing, with developing his philosophy and techniques for making wine.

“They introduced me to the concepts of time, patience, lees aging and traditional barrel aging with regard to the production of European-inspired wines here in the Finger Lakes.” Steve’s reds are held in 2- to 3-year-old, neutral French oak barrels for 36–54 months, and his whites are left on the lees for eight to 24 months without stirring. His extended aging program results in complexity and softness that is the hallmark wine style at Shaw Vineyard.

“If you want bright, shiny, less earthy, complex and dusty red wines, we may not be your first choice,” he says. But it’s a style that makes Shaw customers very happy.

While much newer to the Finger Lakes, Sébastien and Céline LeSeurre of Domaine LeSeurre Winery, bring the same kind of Old World winemaking to the region. Growing up in Champagne, France, in a family that has been handcrafting wine and growing grapes for six generations, Sébastien’s palate and training lean more towards the elegant and mature wine styles of his homeland. Sébastien describes how the colder climates of both Champagne and the Finger Lakes result in wines with rougher tannins and higher acids that require longer aging to create the flavors and textures they desire. For their red wines, aging takes place for 22



Steve Shaw of Shaw Vineyards on the west side of Seneca Lake.

months in French oak to impart a complexity and integration of flavors, and then an additional 12 months in the bottle to ensure that the flavors come back after bottling. For their white wine, Domaine LeSeurre uses pre-oxidation and lees stirring for flavor complexity and age ability. Similar to their reds, they incorporate 12 months resting in the bottles to soften bitter notes and allow for the wine to settle and get over bottle shock. The result, Sébastien describes, are wines in which customers recognize the difference in flavor and character, with an inherent quality that earns their trust, “so they don’t even have to try it before buying”.

Both Shaw and the LeSeurres recognize lengthy in-house aging is becoming more of a lost art in the wine industry today, as the pressures of profitability and market demand become stronger. However, these winemakers are committed to releasing a wine only when they feel the wine is ready, even if it means holding on to some vintages longer than intended.

“We take all this time to make sure people are happy,” says Sébastien. “Think about the best cooking you ever had. Did you make it in a few minutes, or did it take a few hours? If you get the best ingredients and take the time to cook it, the flavors get concentrated and the flavors are better. Aging wine is the same concept.”[©]

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