

A man in a grey shirt and dark trousers is working with large wooden barrels in a dark, industrial setting. He is standing next to a row of four barrels, with a fifth barrel tilted on its side. The floor is wet and reflective, showing the light from the windows. The walls are dark and textured. The text "A taste for Hungarian Oak" is overlaid on the image in a white, elegant script font.

*A taste for
Hungarian
Oak*



Hungarian oak barrels ready for shipment to wineries. Photo courtesy Bouchard Cooperages

The distinctive flavour characteristics of Hungarian oak is gaining increasing attention from the world's winemakers, including in Australia. **Sonya Logan** and **Eleanor Danenberg** spoke to three suppliers of Hungarian oak barrels and products in Australia and two small wine producers based in Western Australia's Margaret River region to learn about its qualities, appeal and contribution to wine quality.

Hungarian oak may only make up 4% of the world's barrel production, but its use by the global wine industry is on the rise, Australia's included.

Amber Glastonbury, national sales manager for Bouchard Cooperages Australia, which supplies Hungarian oak barrels to the local market, said the recent rise in demand for aromatic, lower impact barrels, and barrels at more affordable prices had led to a steady increase in Australian sales of Hungarian oak barrels through her company year on year.

John McGovern, regional sales manager for AP John Coopers, a supplier of Hungarian oak barrels and staves in Australia, also reported increasing sales, albeit that they were on a slow burn, stating that the use of such products locally was currently largely experimental.

Peter Dunlop is managing director of Classic Oak Products, part of the French-based Tonnellerie Francois Frères group (TFF), which has a long standing joint venture with a family cooperage and adjunct facility based in Szigetvar. Referencing the global

demand for Hungarian oak products, Dunlop said acceptance of these barrels and adjunct products was growing, with TFF currently developing new technical products that were "quickly gaining acceptance in many markets".

So, exactly where in Hungary are its oak forests? McGovern explained they were located throughout the Carpathian Mountains which stretches in an arc from the Czech Republic through Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, Serbia and Romania.

"French oak and Hungarian oak are the same species — *Quercus petraea* and



A Hungarian oak tree. Photo Classic Oak Products

Quercus robur,” Glastonbury explained. “Most forests in Europe are made up of these two species and their hybrids. American oak is a completely different species, *Quercus alba*, which is a white oak.

“*Quercus petraea* is known for being more aromatic and a tighter grain. It grows slower in thinner soils and cooler temperatures, whereas *Quercus robur* prefers richer soils and a more moderate climate so typically shows fuller on the palate with more tannin structure.

“The differences in the climate and geography of France and Hungary is the main reason the oak is characteristically different, even though the oak species are the same,” she said.

Like its French and American counterparts, McGovern added that there were subtle differences between the same oak species grown in different parts of Hungary.

Bouchard Cooperages Australia sources its Hungarian barrels from European Coopers, one of Hungary’s three principal cooperages, which categorises its barrels according to forest origin to highlight what each forest has to offer.

“Tokaj wood is sourced from the Zemplen Hills, which surrounds the Tokaj region in the north-east, and the Mecsek wood is from the forests of Mecsek Hills, in the south-west of Hungary, which surrounds the red wine regions — Szekszard and Villany,” Glastonbury said.

“The Zemplen forest is quite unique as almost all of the oak trees are *Quercus petraea*, which is most similar to the famous forest of Tronçais in France, which also has a high proportion of *Quercus petraea*.

“In northern Hungary, the Zemplen Hills have volcanic soils that are thinner with less nutrition; the climate is also much cooler so the trees grow slower and are

a tighter grain. In south-west Hungary, in the Mecsek Hills, the climate is more Mediterranean, and more suited to *Quercus robur*. In Mecsek there are more rolling hills than mountains and richer, more nutritious soils, so the trees don’t struggle to grow and have more power and tannin structure,” she said.

So what are the unique flavour profiles that the oak forests of Hungary impart on wines matured in their wood?

McGovern said Hungarian oak was less tannic and had more brown spice (eugenol) aromatics, such as cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove.

Peter Dunlop added Hungarian barrels provided a richness, good mouthfeel and length, and elements of spice.

Getting forest-specific, Glastonbury added that in her experience, oak from Tokaj in the Zemplen Hills showed more spice flavours, with flavours ranging to coffee and dark chocolate as toast levels increase to M+. Conversely, oak from the Mecsek Hills offered sweeter, more vanillin notes, she said.

Glastonbury, McGovern and Dunlop all agreed that Hungarian oak suited most if not all grape varieties and blends. However, Dunlop said the standouts were Chardonnay, Shiraz, Italian varieties and Grenache.

“It’s not an overt oak, so it complements most wines,” McGovern added. “It’s especially good for wines needing mid palate development without overt tannin input. It works really well with medium-bodied alternative varieties such as Sangiovese and Tempranillo.”

Getting forest-specific again, Glastonbury said the aromatic character and low tannin impact from Tokaj wood was well suited to white wines and lighter more fragrant red wines.

“European Coopers 100% Tokaj wood is working well with Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris, as well as some Grenache, Tempranillo and Shiraz where the winemaker is looking for a more subtle oak impact. For bolder red varieties like some Shiraz, Merlot and Cabernet, European Coopers blends oak from Tokaj and Mecsek to combine the aromatic spice profile from Tokaj, and more tannin and power from the Mecsek oak.”

Asked to comment on how the same variety matured in Hungarian oak might differ if matured in French and American oak, Dunlop said: “The major difference would be between the French and the Hungarian or American oak. American oak brings oak sweetness to the aromatics and palate, a little more density to the wine and not quite the same length. However the better producers of American oak barrels have been working on sourcing and seasoning and within the cooperage, to refine their product.”

“American oak is a different species, it has more oak lactone and shows more vanillin and coconut flavours,” Glastonbury added. “The climate, geography and soil composition of French forests is different to Hungary and can impact the oak style and flavour.”

Until recently, Hungarian oak hasn’t had the best reputation for quality.

“Having been involved [in the industry] back in the late 1990 [and] early 2000s there was only a small amount of export-quality Hungarian oak barrels being produced, almost exclusively by the Molnar family,” Dunlop said. “What occurred was a minor blip of inferior product being imported by people who had no understanding of the product they were selling. Today this is dead and buried.”

McGovern believes Hungarian oak’s bad rap was a misconception, saying that it simply wasn’t that well understood.

Glastonbury agreed: “Hungarian oak is better understood and there is more focus on the seasoning of the wood to reduce the harsher green characters. Winemakers are more interested and experimenting with the flavours and spices of Hungarian oak, and the prices (being cheaper than French) are attractive also.”

And on the dollars and cents, how does the price of Hungarian oak compare with French and American products?

McGovern said Hungarian oak was less expensive than French oak and more expensive than American oak, slightly skewed towards the French oak price.

Glastonbury explained Hungarian oak logs were sold at a set price rather than a blind auction as occurs in France; she



The same two species, *Quercus petraea* and *Quercus robur*, dominate the oak forests in France and Hungary. The main reason the oak is characteristically different from both countries is due to the variations in the climate and geography where the trees are grown in both countries. Photo Bouchard Cooperages

said this gave more stability to the price of Hungarian oak. The strong demand for specific forests in France also drove up the price of oak in that country, she said.

Dunlop said that as a price guide, the TFF group gave French oak an index of 100, with Hungarian oak in the range of 70 to 75 and American oak 50 to 55 for the same specification barrel, depending on currency fluctuations.

The Hungarian oak products currently available through Bouchard Cooperages

Australia include 225L/228L, 300L and 500L barrels made from 100% Tokaj forest, or a Hungarian blend (50% of Tokaj and Mecsek Hills). AP John supplies 300L and 475L Hungarian barrels and tanks staves, while Classic Oak, under the Demptos Szigetvar brand, sells a full range of standard barrel specifications, 225L, 228L, 300L and 500L. Dunlop said some technical barrels were also due to be launched by TFF, while the *Quercus* range of adjunct products included premium chips, bullets, segments, barrel inserts and tank fanpacks. ▶



South by South West's Mijan Patterson on a Hungarian Hogshead, as wine dog Meeka looks on.



South by South West's Mijan Patterson and Livia Maiorana. Photo Neighbourhood Events Co.

Livia Maiorana and Mijan Patterson

South by South West

Margaret River,
Western Australia

How long have you been using Hungarian oak?

We started using Hungarian oak in vintage 2016 with our Shiraz.

What was it that attracted you to use Hungarian oak in the first place?

We were first really exposed to Hungarian oak whilst doing vintages in Italy. There, Hungarian oak was very prevalent and widely used but in larger formats. It was there we got to see the maturation and what characters the oak imparts to wine.

The tighter wood grains and the ability to let wine mature longer in the oak to gain silkier tannins was an attraction, however the cost comparison to French oak was in all honesty the main attraction initially for us.

Which wines have you exposed to Hungarian oak?

Initially just Syrah, however since our first application, we have used Hungarian oak for Sangiovese, and this year we are trialling it on a small batch of Cabernet Sauvignon. We would also like to trial it on Chardonnay in a future vintage.

We are still experimenting and always will be with different oak and applications of oak on different varieties and wine styles.

For us, larger formats and longer maturation times with Hungarian oak is where we are moving more to.

Explain your application of Hungarian oak to date?

We first trialled Hungarian oak with staves to assess the flavour and aromatic profile and impact before having more of an understanding of the flavour profile and then being more confident to move to smaller, new oak hogshead barrels.

We have only used medium toasted products with Hungarian oak to date, and hogshead barrels at this stage is as small as we go. Ideally we think puncheon size gives great results.

Describe the flavour profiles you get from Hungarian oak?

We find it not too dissimilar to French oak but have noticed Hungarian oak can also provide a bit more sweet butterscotch, vanilla and toffee profiles. Spice wise, we see predominantly clove.

What does Hungarian oak give to wine that French or American oak doesn't?

I believe apart from some more delicate aromas and flavours, it provides more on the texture side and acts gentler, providing those silkier tannins - for a lesser price!

Which varieties or styles of wine do you think suit Hungarian oak best?

Full-bodied varieties. They seem to handle the richer flavours and aromas the oak imparts better, and transforms tannins more notably.

What is something you've learned about the application of Hungarian oak to the winemaking process that you didn't know before using it?

We are probably learning more about its application on the texture side to add to a wine's overall palate presence and complexity, as opposed to focusing in on how it influences aromatics and flavour concentrations.

Skigh McManus**Skigh Wines****Margaret River, Western Australia****How long have you been using Hungarian oak?**

2-3 years

What was it that attracted you to use Hungarian oak in the first place?

Recommendation and seeing it used at other wineries.

Which wines have you exposed to Hungarian oak?

Shiraz from southern Margaret River initially. The oak has really responded well to Wilyabrup Cabernet, especially as a third use. Subtle flavours and great maturation vessel.

Explain your application of Hungarian oak to date?

Mainly 2-3 year old 225L medium toast barriques for a 12-month maturation of mainly higher tier wines.

Describe the flavour profiles you get from Hungarian oak?

High vanillin characters as new, but best use for me is as a second or third use where I prefer the subtle spice, lifted fruit and slow maturation expected from tight grain oak.

What does Hungarian oak give to wine that French or American oak doesn't?

We avoid American oak for our wine styles, but as a comparison to French I see the Hungarian being closer in characteristics to some of the northern forests in France due to its tighter grain. Both Hungarian and French oak with this grain display similar characters with higher vanillin in the newer Hungarian barriques being the main difference for our wines. I would like to experiment with larger format Hungarian oak for our Cabernet.

Which varieties or styles of wine do you think suit Hungarian oak best?

Longer maturation (12-18 months) Bordeaux reds.

GW



Sawing Hungarian oak logs into staves. Photo Bouchard Cooperages