



## Roll Out the Barrels – The Barrel Broker

By Nan McCreary

In 2009, when John Gill, custom wine tour operator in California’s Napa and Sonoma Valleys, saw his business decline along with the recession, he knew he had to shift gears to adjust to the economy. With 10 years of experience working in the wine industry, it was only natural that he would follow his trade, but he chose an unlikely — and ultimately fortuitous — path: obtaining and selling reliable, high quality used wine barrels from sources he could trust. “I began by buying six used barrels from Robert Mondavi,” Gill told *Beverage Master Magazine*. “That was a momentous day. I started something new that was a side business — a hobby— and, within six months, turned it into a full-time job.”

Today, eight years later, Gill oversees a 5000 square-foot warehouse in Milwaukee, WI that stores over 1000 used Bourbon, Whiskey, Brandy, American and French oak barrels. He recycles and reuses it all: whole and half barrels, staves, metal bands, cut barrels and even bungs. Gill also stocks 1500 used barrel racks. It’s Gill’s way of contributing to the green initiative. “Recycling is something that’s been a part of our business since day one,” he said. “We try to recycle everything that comes through. Nothing gets wasted. Next year we’re adding new barrel racks, simply because of the demand.”

Gill’s business is divided into four segments: wineries, craft breweries, craft distilleries and “other,” meaning individuals who use reclaimed barrel parts for an “infinite” list of creative projects, such as crafting furniture and home accessories. With the steady growth of the wine industry, and the dramatic increase in craft breweries, demand for used barrels is also on the rise. “A winery can expect to extract flavors from new oak barrels for 30 to 35 months, but most quality used barrels have an aging life of eight or nine years,” Gill explained. “Many new and small wineries prefer used barrels because they are less expensive. Also, some wineries want barrels simply for aging and storage, rather than for extracting flavors. Big wineries, too, will buy older barrels because they blend many of their wines from a mix of new and used barrels.”

Aging beer in barrels is a whole other story. According to Gill, most craft breweries started aging in barrels seven or eight years ago, and now almost all of the bigger breweries are aging with wine and whiskey barrels. Beers gain residual flavors when aged in barrels, plus they develop the oxidative qualities similar to those in barrel-aged wines. And, beers aged in spirits barrels get an extra kick of alcohol from the “devil’s cut” that remains in the wood after the product has been aged.

Gill buys his barrels directly from distilleries located primarily in Kentucky, and wineries in California. Besides selling from his warehouse, Gill also brokers products to be sent directly from the supplier to

the client. “As long as I feel like the product is good, clean, desirable and affordable, I can buy, ship or broker it,” he said.

One challenge, he noted, is that he usually has to buy a product sight unseen. “I look at photos, ask a lot of questions, and I buy from people who have a reputation for selling a good product (barrels). If you have a good product, you typically have good barrels. We stand behind our products, and inspect merchandise when it arrives, and before we ship it out to make sure the quality is good. We have a lot of repeat customers that buy on a regular basis, and we’re proud of that.”

With business booming, Gill still manages to stay close to his roots. He comes from a winemaking family —his parents live on a vineyard in the Sierra Foothills near Sacramento —and he himself has been making wine at home since 2010. Before moving his operation to Wisconsin in 2012 (to be close to his wife’s family), Gill spent his entire career in northern California wine country. “I have a passion not just for wine but for winemaking and wine barrels,” he said, “which is part of the reason I’m in this business.

As Gill looks ahead, he’s looking to expand his family owned business with market demands. His wife recently left the corporate world to join him, and provides administrative support so he can concentrate on buying and selling barrels. Gill also employs several part-time warehouse workers.

Clearly, the future appears bright for the Barrel Broker. “Everyone is trying to do next big thing,” Gill observed. “There’s an explosion going on with trial and error; people are willing to try new things. Bacon beer? It’s not for me, but if people want to make it, I’m all for it. I’m happy that people are experimenting. It’s driving innovation and a lot of great things are coming from it.”

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