

Oak chips are a fixture of the wine industry due to their ease of use and the cost of new cooperage. The use of oak chips can add a significant amount of oak character at a tiny fraction of the cost of new barrels. (We have several winemakers who refer to chips as “micro-barrels.”) Chips have become a staple, particularly in the fighting varietal category where they can add much complexity at an affordable price.

There are hundreds of tons of chips used annually-but very few wineries will admit usage.

Two reasons wineries do not advertise the use of chips are:

- 1) the use of chips is considered “cheating” - a sign of low quality and;
- 2) In the US, toasted chips were illegal until 1993, even though winemakers used them.

Chips are one of the cleanest ways to get a decent oak flavor into bulk wines since the addition can be easily done in a tank. Especially with new methods such as micro-oxygenation, chips can produce wines that are similar to fairly good barrel-aged wines.

Chips are best added during fermentation so that the oak flavors integrate well with the wine, but they can be added anytime except right before bottling.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN CHIPS

Generally, American and French oak chips are available from several suppliers. A variety of toast levels are available although most manufacturers have a house toast which has proven most successful for them.

At Barrel Builders our house toast for French oak chips is a light golden-brown; what we would classify as a medium toast. Our American oak chips are

toasted slightly darker since this seems to mellow the extractives somewhat. The toasting for both is done slowly so that the color is uniform throughout the chip and all the chips are about the same color.

When shopping for chips, look for uniformity of color and size. Be careful not to buy chips that are really shavings or sweepings from the cooperage.

Quality oak chips will be made from wood that is a by-product of the barrel manufacturing process; stave ends, rejects, and other scrap. Consequently the wood will have gone through the same aging process as the manufacturer’s barrels - hopefully with extended air drying.

Wet or kiln-dried wood will impart the same characters as kiln-dried wood used in barrels and are particularly noticeable in American oak.

Some vendors have three year chips available which have a more mellow flavor.

HOW CHIPS ARE USED

We have discussed use patterns, amounts, times and results with numerous wine makers and there is a wide variety of opinion. Following are general guidelines:

A range of 10 to 15 pounds of chips per thousand gallons of wine appears to be a common dosage.

When customers are first experimenting with chips, we often recommend using 8 to 10 ounces for one barrel - start light, you can always add more.

Published literature suggests that extraction is largely complete in a couple of days.

However, many winemakers extract for a week or more while some others wait several months.

One large user swears that a subtle change in flavors occurs between weeks 3 and 5.

Chips can be introduced in several ways. They can simply be dumped into the wine where they will sink in a couple of days and the wine can be racked off.

Several wineries have developed sophisticated methods using stainless steel screens that fit over drain fittings. After the wine is drained from the tank, the door is opened, the screen is removed and the chips, lees and residues are hosed out.

The most common method is to use "tea bags". A bag of loose cloth or other porous material is made up to hold the chips. Attaching a rope makes it easy to get the bag in and out of the tank.

Yet another method is to add a large quantity of chips to a small amount of wine to create an oak extract. The extract is then used to add flavor during the blending process.