#### winemaking



#### **Winemaker Trials**

## Using Eclat Barrels to Achieve Varied Phenolic Levels and Sensory Characteristics in Willow Creek Chardonnay

Curious about the phenolic effects of ceramictoasted barrels and hydro-toasted barrels, winemaker Mark Welch decided to test both on single-vineyard Chardonnay from the Willow Creek AVA.



Stacy Briscoe

IN 2013, CO-OWNER AND winemaker Mark Welch, along with co-owner Greg Jelstrom, produced Torch Cellars' first vintage. Their collaboration is driven by passion and a desire to produce elegant wines. Their logo, a sun, is a beautiful handmade art piece handed down from Mark's grandmother who was an artist living in Santa Cruz, CA during the Roaring '20s and is the cornerstone and symbol of the Torch label. "Torch" was the nickname given to Mark during his early days working at the famous Wild Horse Winery in the early 1990s.

Winery: Torch Cellars

**Objective:** The objective of the trial is to analyze phenolic levels and sensory factors in Chardonnay wine from the Willow Creek District when using ceramic-toasted and hydro-toasted barrels.

**Trial Discription:** The trial is a barrel aging evaluation that consists of Chardonnay wine made from two distinct vineyards (2017 and 2018 vintages) located in the Willow Creek District: **Township Vineyard** (Teressa Angela block, 4.5 acres) and **Jack Creek Vineyard** (Kruse block, 5 acres). All factors for the 2017 vintage and 2018 vintage are similar (except for harvest dates, Brix and TA) for quantity and production methods. Approximately 1 ton



Stacy Briscoe is the assistant editor of Wine Business Monthly. She has been writing about wine professionally since 2015, freelancing for multiple publications including The San Francisco Chronicle, Edible Communities and Napa Sonoma Magazine, among others. She also maintains her own website, BriscoeBites.com, dedicated to wine reviews and tasting notes. Outside of wine writing, she also contributes as a freelance editor for the independent publisher

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of grapes from each vineyard designation was heat-stabilized, barrel-fermented, and sur lie-aged for four months then blended together prior to bottling. Both vintages exclusively used the **Vinéa** Eclat ceramic barrels.

**Lot 1:** 2018 Willow Creek District Chardonnay - Bottle Samples **Lot 2:** 2017 Willow Creek District Chardonnay - Barrel Samples

#### Winemaker's Postmortem

Why was it important for you to study the phenolics of Chardonnay? Was there a specific problem you were looking to solve or goal you wanted to achieve in your Chardonnay program?

Welch: I like Chardonnays, and I was impressed with the Chardonnays from the Willow Creek AVA, especially wines made from the Midnight Cellars Township vineyard designation. There was no specific problem I wanted to solve; rather it was important for me to study the phenolics. I'd been enjoying the phenolic barrel profiles I was tasting and wanted to dive into the specifics a bit more.

Why were you interested, specifically, in measuring those phenolics after aging the wine in ceramic-toasted and hydro-toasted barrels? What was the question about varying toast processes that you were hoping to answer?

**Welch**: I was introduced to the hydro-toasted barrels by another respected winemaker, who thought my wines would benefit immensely from them and match well with my winemaking style. I wasn't sure how the hydro barrel



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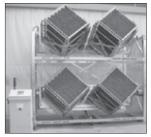
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would perform but was intrigued with the process and curious if one could differentiate between the two barrel types.

#### Can you briefly describe how you set up the trial?

**Welch**: My original goal was to analyze the 2018 Chardonnay using the two barrel types. Unfortunately, I had blended the 2018 barrel types just prior to registering for the winemaker's trial. So, I decided to compare and contrast the 2017 and 2018: the 2017 was exclusive Eclat ceramic radiant long (CRL); the 2018 was a blend of both Eclat CRL and Eclat hydro barrels.

#### Were there any complications during the trial? If so, how did you address any problems that occurred?

**Welch**: There were no real complications to speak of. One barrel was a tad slower to finish fermentation, but no additional work was required.

#### What was your team's thought process during the trial? Did they have any specific hypotheses or expectations regarding the experiment?

**Welch**: Based on the literature, the hydro barrels should express a more prolific fruit expression and less smoky characteristic. I was impressed with the CRL barrel from 2017 and was looking forward to the 2018 hydro barrel style, knowing that, at some point, I would blend the two barrel types.

### Can you briefly describe the results of the trial? What winemaking lessons did you learn?

**Welch:** If you compare the oak volatiles panels from 2017 versus 2018, the 2018 had higher levels (ug/L) in all categories. I would like to correlate the wine analysis with the oak volatiles.

#### Based on those results, do you intend to make any adjustments to your current Chardonnay program? Did you, personally, prefer one wine over the other? If so, why?

**Welch**: Chardonnay has the ability to age well: it's a complex wine that can be either buttery or crisp. In this trial I prefer the 2018, but it's still early. If I do incorporate any adjustments, it will be on the winemaking side—specifically monitoring the malolactic fermentation a bit more closely.

### What were some of the comments from the team? Which wine did they prefer?

**Welch**: Initially, I had far more positive compliments for the 2017. However, I just bottled the 2018 last month, and the few winemakers that have tasted it prefer the 2018 over the 2017.

### Do you plan to do a follow-up trial to re-test these results?

**Welch**: Yes, I do plan to follow up and have already ordered my barrels for the 2019 vintage. This coming harvest I plan to keep separate barrel samples and analyze independently. **WBM**