

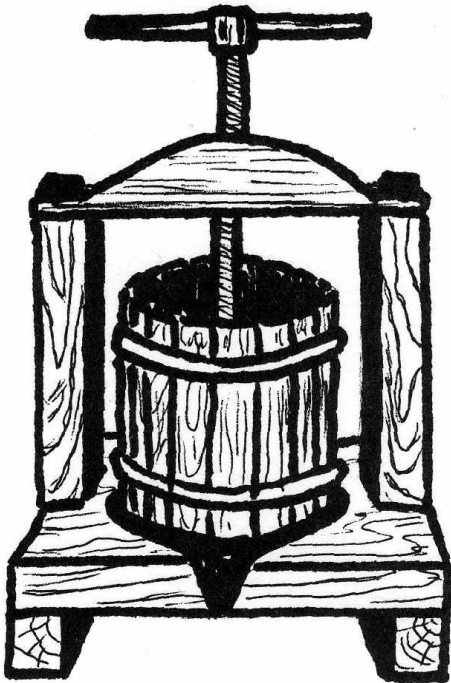
# THE VINTNER'S PRESS

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## John Gill, The Barrel Broker: Californian Relocates His "Green" Used Barrel Company To Mequon

Stephen Franzoi



I recently met and spent time talking to a new business owner in the Milwaukee area, John Gill, who sells a product that many WVA members will undoubtedly find interesting: used oak wine barrels. His company, The Barrel Broker, is advertised as a "green" business. For those not familiar with this term, a green company acts in a way that minimizes damage to the environment. As the scientific reality of global warming sinks in, an ever-growing number of companies are doing their part to become environmentally more responsible or "green." Being green is the driving philosophy behind John Gill's four-year-old business venture of buying previously used oak wine and "spirit" barrels and reselling them for continued use in activities as varied as gardening, decorating, furniture making, brewing, and winemaking. So let's learn a bit more about the man behind The Barrel Broker and what he can offer WVA members so that their winemaking efforts are more "fruitful."

### California Roots

John's desire to create businesses with small environmental footprints goes back further than his current used-barrel business. Born and raised in Northern California, John was immersed in an area of the country that was at the forefront of the green movement. In 2001, armed with his degree in Resort & Lodging Management (Recreation Administration) from California State University at Chico and inspired by already-existing green businesses in the San Francisco Bay area, John started a small private tour business, "Escape San Francisco Tours," which offered active vacations in the Sonoma area of Northern California. His tour company provided small groups of people the opportunity to take one-day cycling, hiking, or kayaking tours, as well as 3-day or 5-day multi-sport vacation tours. One of John's more popular one-day tours involved bicycling through wine country, with frequent tasting stops at wineries along the route. In 2003, the company expanded 100 or so miles east to include "Escape Sacramento Tours"



John Gill



and the company's name was soon shortened to simply "Escape Travel." You can still Google John's now defunct tour business and read the positive reviews of his many satisfied active vacation customers.

## The Birth of "The Barrel Broker"

Although Escape Travel thrived for awhile, the 2008 recession contributed to a sharp reduction in corporate-sponsored tours and, at the same time, the tour business industry became much more competitive. With a 15-person van, cargo trailer, and storage area that were often unused due to the business slowdown, John decided to explore additional environmentally responsible ventures. Based on his conversations with many winemakers and cellar masters, in March 2009 John bought some used barrels from Robert Mondavi Winery in



John at the Robert Mondavi Winery in 2009

Napa Valley and soon sold them as garden planters. Within a few months, as small wineries began contacting John requesting barrel racks and good-quality used barrels for winemaking, his new business, The Barrel Broker, was born. The used barrels he now sells come from coopers throughout the world, including Seguin Moreau, Francois Feres, Demptos, Boutes, Taransaud, and World Cooperage.

Right from the start, John's barrel business was a committed green recycling company, working to reuse oak barrels, barrel racks, silicon/wood bungs and other used wine barrel accessories to help ensure the future sustainability of oak forests. Most quality used barrels have a good wine making/aging life of about 8-9 years. The Barrel Broker also



Barrel Planters

began selling barrel staves, barrel heads, wine-soaked oak for grilling/smoking, and even the metal bands of the barrel; when not used whole, every single part of the barrel was recycled and reused in some fashion. At first, John sold barrels mostly to wineries and breweries, but he then realized that whiskey and bourbon makers were also seeking to oak their liquor, and that is when he began buying and trading for used whiskey or "spirit" barrels. Many of these spirit barrels were 59 gallons, but there were also plenty of 5-gallon, 15-gallon, and 30-gallon barrels that had previously held, gin, whiskey, or bourbon.



Wine barrels and spirit barrels are often made from the same types of oak and with the same barrel design; where they may differ is in whether their insides are either slowly toasted or more quickly charred. The insides of oak wine barrels are typically slowly fire heated to various light, medium, or heavy toast levels, infusing the wine that is later aged within it with such aromas and flavors as vanilla, coffee, and roasted nut. In contrast, the insides of oak spirit barrels are generally more quickly and intensely fire heated so that the wood is actually charred to one of four or five levels of intensity, imparting the liquor inside with such tastes and aromas as burnt toast, vanilla, and caramel, as well as tinting it with different shades of brown coloring.

## Blending Career and Family Needs

During the years that John was developing his touring business, he met and married Kathleen, an investment broker who had grown up in the Milwaukee area but was now living and working in the Bay Area. With the arrival of both a son and a daughter, John and Kathleen began developing their domestic skills. Given Kathleen's relatively inflexible work hours as a corporate executive, John learned how to adeptly juggle his dual roles of entrepreneur and stay-at-home Dad. Last year when Kathleen had a career opportunity with Franklin Templeton Investments to move back to the Milwaukee area, the family decided to pull up roots and build a new life in the Midwest.



In June of 2012, John arrived in Milwaukee with 230 barrels and eight wine racks, setting up his business in Brown Deer. Twelve months later, John has moved The Barrel Broker to a considerably larger and nicer 5,000 square foot facility in Mequon. During the first part of 2013, The Barrel Broker's Milwaukee-area sales accounted for about 20 percent of its business, with the remaining 80 percent being largely Internet-based sales to wineries, breweries, and distilleries outside the Greater Milwaukee Metropolitan Area. Later this year, Lakefront Brewery will release its annual Pumpkin Lager that has been aged in 120 barrels supplied by The Barrel Broker. In the future, John would like to increase the volume of his Milwaukee-area sales, partly by selling to amateur winemakers and brewers.

### **John's Own Winemaking Efforts**

Prior to buying and selling used oak wine barrels, John was a wine drinker but not a wine maker. However, his mother and stepfather live in a Sierra Hills gated community of 88 Mediterranean-style homes in Loomis, California, called Clos du Lac, which is a French idiom meaning "walled vineyard by the lake." In Clos du Lac, each homeowner's half-acre lot is planted with Petite Sirah, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, or Mouvedre grapevines owned and maintained by the neighborhood homeowners' association. Each fall, these grapes are harvested and made into wine by the homeowners or local wineries, including John's parents, often with the help and guidance of experienced winemakers. The grapes are also sold for \$1,200-\$1,500 per ton to home winemakers, depending on the age and location of the vines.

Starting in 2007, John began making wine at his parents' house from grapes grown in the Clos du Lac Vineyard. I have tasted a bottle of John's 2011 Petite Sirah and it has an excellent fruit-forward aroma, with a wonderful initial blackberry taste that is followed by a strong aftertaste of leathery tannins; this full-bodied red will undoubtedly age very well in the bottle for years. Now that John and his family have relocated 3,000 miles away from his Clos du Lac grape source, he is seeking fellow Milwaukee-area winemakers who might be interested in teaming up to purchase and ferment good-quality grapes to age in one or two of his 59-gallon oak barrels. If any WVA members are interested in teaming up with John to do some barrel aging of wine, he would be eager to talk to you.



Grapevines in the Clos du Lac Neighborhood



Clos du Lac Cabernet Franc

### **Purchasing Barrels From The Barrel Broker**

The Barrel Broker's new business location is in Mequon at 10520 Baehr Road, Suites I & J, just one block north of Donges Bay Road. The business phone number is 262-236-9189, and John recommends that you phone ahead so that he can schedule a mutually convenient time to show you his available barrels or other barrel-related items. He sells American, French, and Hungarian oak wine barrels that previously held either red or white wines. Typically, these barrels have been used for wine aging between three to six times over a five to seven year period. Because these barrels come from wineries, they are almost always in the 59-gallon or 60-gallon sizes, but some are 70 gallons. The most common barrel size is the Bordeaux style holding 225 litres (59 gallons), with the Burgundy style barrel holding 228 litres (60 gallons) being next. All of John's used oak barrels that are five gallons in size have previously held bourbon, gin, or whiskey; he also has a smaller supply of 15-gallon and 30-gallon spirit barrels.

Although a 59-gallon or a 60-gallon oak barrel is generally considered the ideal size for wine aging, many amateur home wine makers do not have enough wine to fill such a large vessel. What about 15-gallon, 20-gallon,

or 30-gallon used oak wine barrels? When I asked John whether he had in stock any of those sized barrels, he shook his head and replied, "Very seldom does anyone offer to sell me 15-gallon or 30-gallon wine barrels. Wineries don't typically use such small-sized barrels and when amateur winemakers purchase new small oak barrels for \$250 - \$500 they don't ever sell them."

As I slowly digested John's disappointing answer regarding the availability of smallish used wine barrels, my thoughts drifted back to his ample stock of 5-gallon oak "spirit" barrels and his smaller stock of 15-gallon and 30-gallon oak "spirit" barrels. When John had earlier knocked loose the wooden bung on one of his 5-gallon bourbon barrels that had been emptied of its liquor just 6 weeks ago, the now-exposed bunghole exuded a heavy bourbon aroma. "Hmmm..." I now wondered. "Could these smallish bourbon barrels be rinsed with hot water, vigorously shaken, drained, and then filled with wine for aging? Would the resulting wine emerge months later smelling and tasting wonderful? Or would the wine taste too much like bourbon to be enjoyable? Hmmm..."

After later doing some Internet searching, I discovered that this wedding of used spirit barrels with newly fermented wine is not without precedent. About eight years ago, a group of Australian winemakers decided to try aging some of their most promising Shiraz wine in oak barrels that had previously held Kentucky whiskey, eventually resulting in 1,500 cases of "Southern Belle Shiraz" that sold for \$25 a bottle. So it appears that aging young wine in used spirit barrels can yield good results wine-wise.

Now that WVA members know that there is a Milwaukee-area business that sells used spirit barrels, perhaps some adventurous winemakers might like to try this same sort of wedding of wine and spirit barrels and then report their results to the rest of our association members in the coming months. The WVA has an education program that will partially reimburse members for these types of winemaking experiments, and thus far, the program has been underutilized. So here is an opportunity for someone to branch out and explore a variation in winemaking that few have previously examined. Anyone interested?



5-gallon oak bourbon barrel ready for wine?

**Editor's Note:** If you have read this article, please send me, Steve Franzoi, a brief note by hitting "reply" on the email message that contained this *Vintner's Press* article as an attachment; I want to have some idea how many WVA members are reading *The Vintner's Press* each month. When you send me a quick reply, your name will be entered into a drawing at the Lake Front Brewery Cookout and Potluck on July 10th, with the winner (if s/he is in attendance) receiving a \$20-\$30 bottle of commercial wine that is in our association's stockpile. Thanks!