



Barrels of flavour

BARRELS ARE INCREASINGLY FINDING A PLACE IN BREWERIES AROUND AUSTRALIA AND CREATING A HOST OF INNOVATIVE BEERS ACROSS A RANGE OF STYLES.

by James Smith



A handful of Australian brewers have been experimenting with oak barrels for years now. But, as the craft beer boom continues to sweep the country as brewers search for new flavours, aromas and textures, it is becoming harder to find a brewery that doesn't have at least one or two former wine or spirit barrels on the go.

It has reached a point where it's not just hops that are in short supply; now brewers are battling to get their hands on barrels and watching prices sky rocket.

"Five years ago, everyone had to have a pale, then it was an IPA, then a saison, then maybe something sour. Now everyone wants a barrel program," says Matt Houghton, founder and head brewer at Melbourne's Boatrocker Brewery and a man well placed to comment on the rising popularity of barrels in beer production. Before he'd even commissioned his brewhouse, he bought 60 wine barrels from the Yarra Valley – much to the bemusement of his wife and business partner Andrea. And the first beer Matt brewed was put into barrels, where it stayed for 30 months before being released. Furthermore, his Starward Whisky barrel-aged imperial stout Ramjet is one of the best-loved beers in Australia; Ramjet Day was held to launch the most recent vintage and all 100 tickets were sold at \$150 a pop.

Matt says the current trend is no surprise: once again, it is the local market following the US craft beer scene. But its popularity is causing him some issues. "When we got our first wine barrels, they were \$50 each. The second time they were \$100 for 250 litres," says Matt. "Now it averages \$130 to \$200 depending on the barrel and its age; it's hard to get any white wine barrels now."

At Boatrocker, the barrel collection numbers more than 200 and they are used for various purposes. Whisky and bourbon barrels, the latter costing \$450 each, are used once or twice with big stouts and barley wines. Wine barrels and barriques are used to inoculate various Belgian-style beers with bacteria and yeast strains that will deliver beers of varying levels of complexity, acidity and sourness. Many are being used to build a stock of lambic-style sour beer that can then be blended with different beers of various vintages. Matt professes a desire to "take on wine", delivering an alcoholic drink of similar complexity, depth and acidity in low-carbonated, lower-ABV beer form. While Boatrocker is very much at the pointy end of such developments in Australia, there are plenty of others focusing serious attention on the powers of oak. La Sirène and Two Metre

Tall have loyal followings for their creations, Feral Brewing's sour Watermelon Warhead has won Champion Craft Beer and is now available on tap year-round, Robe Town adds a stock sour ale to all of its quirky releases, while even Lion-owned White Rabbit is building a large wooden war chest in Victoria's Geelong. Once they've built up enough stock, they intend to make a gently soured red ale their fourth core beer – not something one would have expected from a major brewery even two or three years ago.

It's something that Chris Thomson, the beer-loving head distiller at Tasmania's pioneering Lark Distillery, has been watching eagerly from the other side of the fence. Lark barrels are in great demand; more than 20 Australian breweries have used them to date, including Mountain Goat, where they helped create a barley wine that was named the 2015 Australian International Beer Awards Champion Australian Beer.

Chris is a fan of IPAs aged in oak – not the most common style to receive such treatment – and cites such a beer from fledgling Hobart brewery The Winston as a favourite, as well as barrel-aged cider coming out of Willie Smith's and Seven Sheds' recreation of the original IPAs – a beer they sent back and forth across the Bass Strait in barrels for a month.

For brewers entering the world of barrel ageing, Chris says to remember it's all about balance. "It's as much about conditioning time as it is about taking flavours from the barrel," he says.

"Everyone loves fresh beer, but well-conditioned beer is also something of exquisite beauty. We have a policy with whisky that it doesn't come out of the cask until it's ready. It's no different for beer: [the characters] need to integrate together."

Patience is one reason Boatrocker has enjoyed such success with its barrel-aged styles – beers that routinely spend months or years in barrels and sometimes further months in bottle before hitting the market. And, looking ahead, Matt believes more time will only help him – and other local brewers exploring this realm earnestly – make even better beers.

"Our brewery is just over three years old," Matt says, explaining that the longer his wine barrels are filled with inoculated beer, the more character and complexity he will have to play with. "Compared with Belgium or the US, our barrel program is very much in its infancy."

But brewers need only look at their partners in oak for inspiration. "Just look at what's happened with Tasmanian whisky in the last five years," says Chris. ●