ELEMENTS OF Style

Jean-Charles Boisset Ups the Ante for Elevated Service
The forest of Tronçais is considered by many to yield the highest-caliber oakwood in Europe. California-based Jordan Winery now employs the use of 100% oak in its cooperage program.
French Kiss

A KISS CAN sometimes be a slobbering mess, but when performed with skill, it can be tantalizingly sensual and profound, elevating passions—and life—to new heights. In winemaking, an oak regimen can have similar effects. When poorly matched, wood can slather the wine with a sticky, imposing glaze—an approach often taken deliberately to mask a variety of flaws. Conversely, judiciously applying the right type of wood will highlight the wine’s natural fruit essence, even lending a pinch of spice and a peck of whimsical aplomb.

Which is why, in a move that pays homage to the great growths of Bordeaux, California’s Jordan Winery has phased out the use of American oak after more than 40 years. The 2015 vintage marks the first-ever Jordan Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon matured in 100 percent French oak (a mix of new and one-year-old barrels).

Winemaker Rob Davis, who just celebrated his 43rd harvest at Jordan, says the transition has helped him realize his commitment to make every vintage of Jordan better than the last. In recent years Davis felt increasingly dissatisfied with the potential of Jordan’s estate-grown Cabernet, which was planted in poorly drained, alluvial soils on the valley floor and some hillsides. Davis eventually convinced second-generation winery owner John Jordan to source fruit from select Alexander Valley benchland vineyards—sites with the desired combination of clay, gravel, limestone, and gypsum soils. The results were dramatic: increased ripeness with less sugar, intensified cassis and blackberry flavors, and more refined tannins.

Davis knew this perfectly ripened, deeply flavored, and well-structured fruit demanded a new oak regimen. “We wanted barrels that best support and showcase the pristine, dark fruit character,” he said, noting that American oak masks those sought-after flavors. By contrast, French oak—and in particular, Colbert oak—proves superior in its ability to frame and showcase the intensity of fruit while binding with and taming the Cabernet tannins, lending a soft, silky Bordeaux style. Davis specially selected Colbert wood—the gold standard for oak, it hails from a small grove in the Tronçais forest first planted in the late 1600s—for its tight grain, finesse, and ability to highlight aromatic notes of rose petal and violet.

“We don’t want the word ‘power’ in our tasting notes,” Davis says. “Balance, elegance, refinement, length of finish—these are the qualities I strive for in our wines. The 2015 Jordan Cabernet Sauvignon exudes great fruit character and fine structure that French oak supports and elevates. I’ve been dreaming of releasing a wine like this for decades.” Davis often muses that pairing Jordan’s terroir-driven fruit with French oak makes the wine sing like a violin. “Our 2015 Cabernet hits all the right notes,” he adds. “It is no coincidence that sommeliers often blind-taste Jordan alongside many of the top crus of Bordeaux.”

That’s the thing about a perfect kiss: It can make you break into song—just like a great glass of wine. ☺

Editor’s note: The 2015 Jordan Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon will be released on May 1, 2019.

JORDAN WINERY SHIFTS TO 100 PERCENT FRENCH OAK FOR ITS 2015 ALEXANDER VALLEY CABERNET SAUVIGNON

by Cliff Rames