
Barrel-Ageing
From A Philistine's Perspective
By Jeff Overturf
OTMP Barrel Enthusiast

Woo Hoo, Fuckidy-Doo

Levesque thought a piece about barrel-ageing might be an interesting read, so he reached out to the OTMP expert for sage advice on the topic. Unfortunately Ryan told him to fuck off, so you are stuck with some shitty takes from a back-bencher.

I bring to the table little to no technical expertise on the subject of barrel-ageing, but what I lack in book smarts on the subject I make up for with practical experience and an ignorant enthusiasm for the final product. Barrel-aged beers are simply magical, and each effort is an absolutely unique adventure, from the process to the end result in the glass. Sometimes it's a shit-show, but sometimes—oh, the magic that happens is like no other homebrewing experience. Tasting a truly fantastic barrel-aged beer is the reason I love this hobby so much.

So here are my uneducated thoughts on this most pleasurable (IMHO) corner of the homebrewing universe.

Have A Fucking Plan

These things don't happen without A LOT of organizing and herding of cats. The main reason barrel projects are rare for homebrewers is that the logistics are daunting. The barrel must be acquired, multiple brewers must coordinate brewing, the barrel must be stored and tended, bottling day needs to coincide with a new fill…all of these moving parts must move in sync for things to be successful.

Here's what a good plan looks like:

Pick a recipe that is appropriate for barrel-ageing. A big, boozy, deliciously-decadent recipe, that can stand up to the flavor-folding power of the oak, booze, and oxidation that will occur in the barrel.

Yard up a bunch of buddies who know how to brew well, and won't fuck it up. One contaminated batch of beer will ruin the whole barrel.

Brew the beer BEFORE obtaining the barrel. It's far better to have the brewed beer sit idle while haggling over a barrel than it is to have an empty barrel sit and dry out while waiting for beer to ferment.

Taste all the beers before they go into the barrel. See 2 above.

Be patient, and don't fuck with the barrel. If you're lookin', bad bugs could begin a cookin'. Taste only sparingly.

Plan ahead for bottling, and have a new beer ready to go in THE SAME DAY. This ensures a successful second fill, and limits the likelihood of contamination.

Over 90% of a successful barrel project is planning and logistics.

Don’t Fuck It Up

Having a plan is good, but executing a plan is hard. Be attentive to the details. Each step above has some subtleties that require thought and execution. Some things to think about:

Ensure there is a place to actually store the barrel (thanks Dave!). Think about temperature, access to plumbing (especially a drain), adequate space for filling/emptying, etc. Don’t offer to store a barrel in your carpeted, finished basement unless you want to trash said basement if the barrel leaks. It’s pretty rare to have a space that works well for barrel-ageing, so we are lucky to have the stars align with Dave’s awesome space.

Plan a recipe, AND another recipe. Most projects should have two clean fills, which means the initial, boozy beer, followed by another slightly toned-down booze character beer. The first fill needs to be something that can really compliment the barrel character—the classic is of course a big Imperial Stout to go with a whiskey barrel. Or another classic is a Belgian Quad paired with a red wine barrel. The second fill can be a bit more playful, as the beer does not have to battle the strong character of the barrel.

Over 90% of a successful barrel project is attention to detail.

Don’t Let That Barrel Dry Out!

If you have need to leave a barrel without beer for more than a couple of weeks, I recommend putting in some chemicals to inhibit growth of bugs in the wood. A solution of 0.127 g/l (0.017 oz/gal) of potassium metabisulfite with 1g/l (.12 oz/gal) of tartaric or citric acid should do the trick. Leave in the barrel until ready to fill. I have filled the barrel completely, and I have also mixed up 5-10 gallons and left in the bottom of the barrel with a bung to seal it. Both seemed effective for a short time. For a full fill on a 60 gallon wine barrel, the ratio works out to 1.02 oz potassium metabisulfite and 7.2 oz acid; for 5 gallons use 2.4 grams/19 grams respectively.

You WILL Fuck It Up

“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face.” Mike Tyson must be a homebrewer, because the plan never works out as planned. Think about how your average brew day ALWAYS has something go at least a little bit off-kilter: a stuck pump, a boil-over, a temperature fuck-up, etc. Now multiply that by a gazillion and you have an idea of all the potential problems with a barrel project. Our current project is a classic example, where a simple yeast problem affected over half the barrel shares, and we needed emergency help from Dave and Evan to bail out the effort.

Here's a short list of problems I have personally experienced with barrel projects:

o Obtaining the barrel before brewing the beer. Sometimes someone finds an opportunity to purchase a barrel and they just can’t resist, even though there is no plan in place to brew the beer. This can result in weeks or months of the barrel sitting idle, drying out, and possibly getting contaminated. Just say no to that great deal; it’s not worth the hassle.

o Short fill on the barrel. This is common, and is the result of not all the beer being ready to go in at one time. It can become a serious problem if the fill remains significantly short for an extended period, with the worst case being *Acetobacter* contamination (it thrives on oxygen).

o Dry barrel. If a barrel sits empty, it can quickly dry out and lose its ability to hold liquid. The only solution for a dry barrel is to have liquid in it at all times, which

Bottle That Shit!

Serving a barrel-aged beer on tap is great (especially if you have a nitro tap for a giant, unctuous Imperial Stout), but there is something magical that happens when you let it naturally carb in the bottle. I've had all manner of success and failure with carbonation levels in the bottle, and based on trial and error I can unreservedly recommend the following process for the best results. These are usually really big beers, so don't fuck with this tried-and-true approach:

- Remove beer from the barrel into a 5 gallon bottling bucket.
- Boil up 1.5 cups water with an appropriate amount of priming sugar. I use corn sugar as a good neutral sugar, and an online calculator to determine amount. For example, for around 2.5 volumes of CO2, add just under 5 oz of corn sugar.
- Rehydrate ½ packet of Red Star Premier Blanc Champagne yeast (the yellow package). This yeast has consistently outperformed all others for some reason, probably due to its high alcohol tolerance.
- Mix the sugar and yeast into the bottling bucket and bottle the beer.
- Cork and cage is a classy look if you have the means—soak the corks in a Star San solution to sanitize and lube them up. I have a floor corker if you ever want to borrow it!

Salvage Your Fucked-Up Shit (if you can)

So you have a barrel project that goes south, and you are stuck with some abomination that was NOT what you intended. What next?

As noted above, sometimes accidents are happy ones, and an "accidental" sour turns out amazing. Dean had a favorite brown ale recipe that would taste amazing in a barrel, so we brewed it up for a second fill in a bourbon barrel. Some mild contamination occurred at some point, and instead of a clean brown ale we now had 53 gallons of a slightly tart brown beer that was not awful, but not good. We settled on a solution that involved sweet-talking Dry Dock out of 40 pounds of apricot puree, and an extended ageing in the barrel that produced a pretty darn good apricot brown sour. It has cellared very well, and tastes like a fine fruited Oud Bruin. Sometimes it's what's in the glass, not what's in the recipe, that matters.

means either filling immediately upon emptying, or keeping a prophylactic chemical mix in the barrel while it awaits the next fill. I've had success with a tartaric acid/ potassium metabisulfite solution for this purpose.

o Contamination. Wild bugs love barrels, and they will eventually defeat your efforts to fend them off. Wild yeast, *Pediococcus,* and *Lactobacillus* are common bugs that want to find a home in the delicious oak staves, so good sanitary practices are a must for the first few fills. After that, it's best to embrace the bugs and work with them to produce some amazing sours. Unintentional sours happen—they are sometimes a happy accident, but are often a project-killing disaster.

Over 90% of a successful barrel project is adapting to disasters and being able to overcome mistakes.

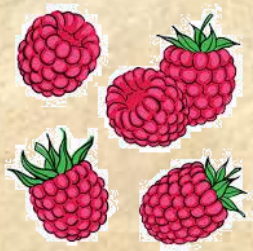
Enjoy The Fucking Ride

Another project that went south was not so happy. With most of the homebrewers over-extended with seven (!) active barrel projects, we let one barrel sit half-filled for too long and what was once a promising Wee Heavy turned into malt vinegar. There is no solution to Acetobacter, so the only option was to dump it. Well, most of it. A small silver lining was a few gallons of vinegar that have been making the best fucking Sauerbraten you have ever tasted. I still feed that malty abomination to keep it going, and it's amazing.

Over 90% of a successful barrel project is rolling with the punches.

Over 360% of a barrel project is pure joy, because it has a unique potential to deliver something so incredibly satisfying. But a barrel project is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you're going to get. Sometimes it's that shitty hard caramel that pulls your filling out, but sometimes it's that magnificent, velvety chocolate nougat with hints of vanilla, dark fruit, oak, and just a kiss of roastiness. The fun of the process, at least for me, is never knowing where you are going to land. It's always a gamble and there are no guarantees—but when things go right, there is nothing more deliciously amazing. And if things go wrong? Put on your big-boy brewing pants and take another run at it. Because magic awaits out there, somewhere, in a snug oak cocoon filled with hopes and dreams.

Get Fruity With That Shit



So you want to make a delicious Cherry Lambic or Imperial Peach Saison? You have two options: throw that fruit right in the damn barrel after an initial ageing period (six months seems to be a sweet spot), or pull out 5 gallon shares and fruit them up individually. The former works great if the project is designed around the fruit (like the Cherry Lambic example). The latter is best when there is no clear consensus on the fruit addition, and allows for maximum flexibility with the barrel project. Some brewers can add fruit and other adjuncts while others can bottle the straight from the barrel.

Some caveats...first, adding massive amounts of fruit to the barrel causes a loss of around 10 gallons of finished beer due to the fruity "muck" created at the bottom. Second, it makes an enormous mess. Most fruit additions are in the 40-50 pound range, and that makes A LOT of fruity goo to dispose of after bottling. Hauling the barrel outside and hosing it out where the fruit and yeast sludge can compost is best.