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Napa is home to one of the most talented wine barrel builders in the world. He only works for 2 wineries



Jessica Christian/The Chronicle



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In the middle of a legendary [Napa vineyard](#) sits a makeshift workshop. Constructed of two metal containers and a tin roof, it doesn't even have a foundation. But this humble shop functions as a small cooperage, the place where master cooper Ramiro Herrera painstakingly builds, toasts and repairs fine oak wine barrels.

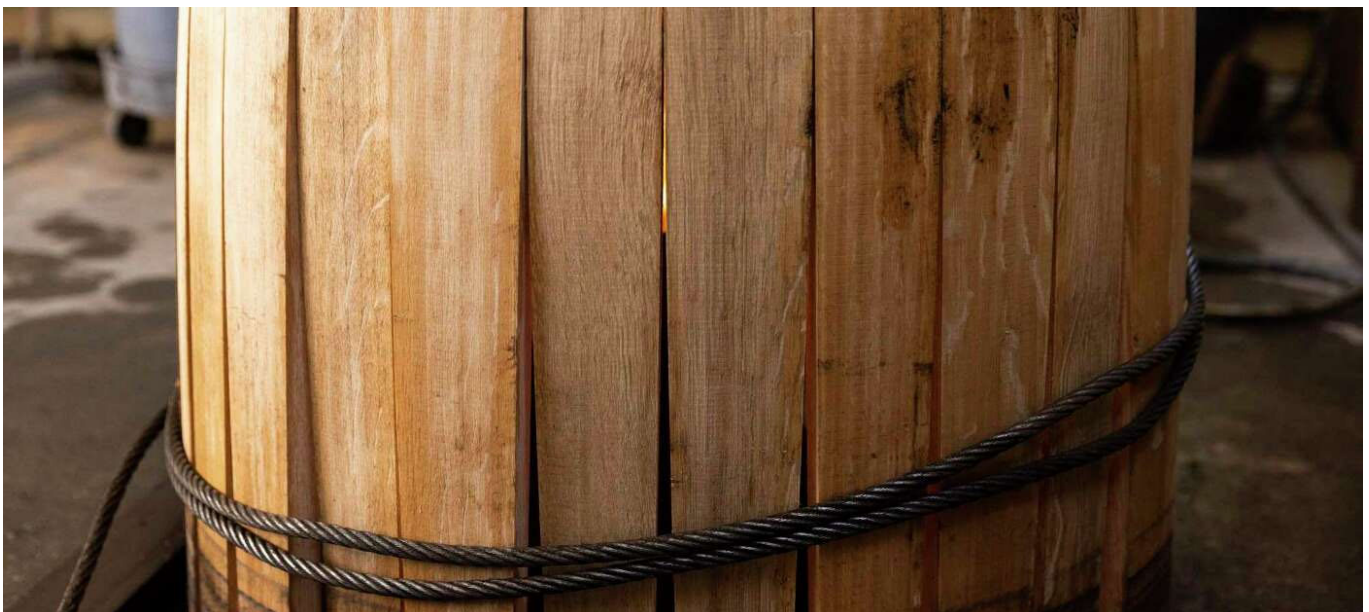
Many wine drinkers are familiar with the term master sommelier, a high-ranking and [controversial title](#) granted to sommeliers who pass a daunting examination. But few have heard of the elusive master cooper title, held by a small pool of the most skilled barrel builders in the world. Herrera believes he's the only American master cooper in the world and the first of Mexican heritage to have completed a traditional apprenticeship.

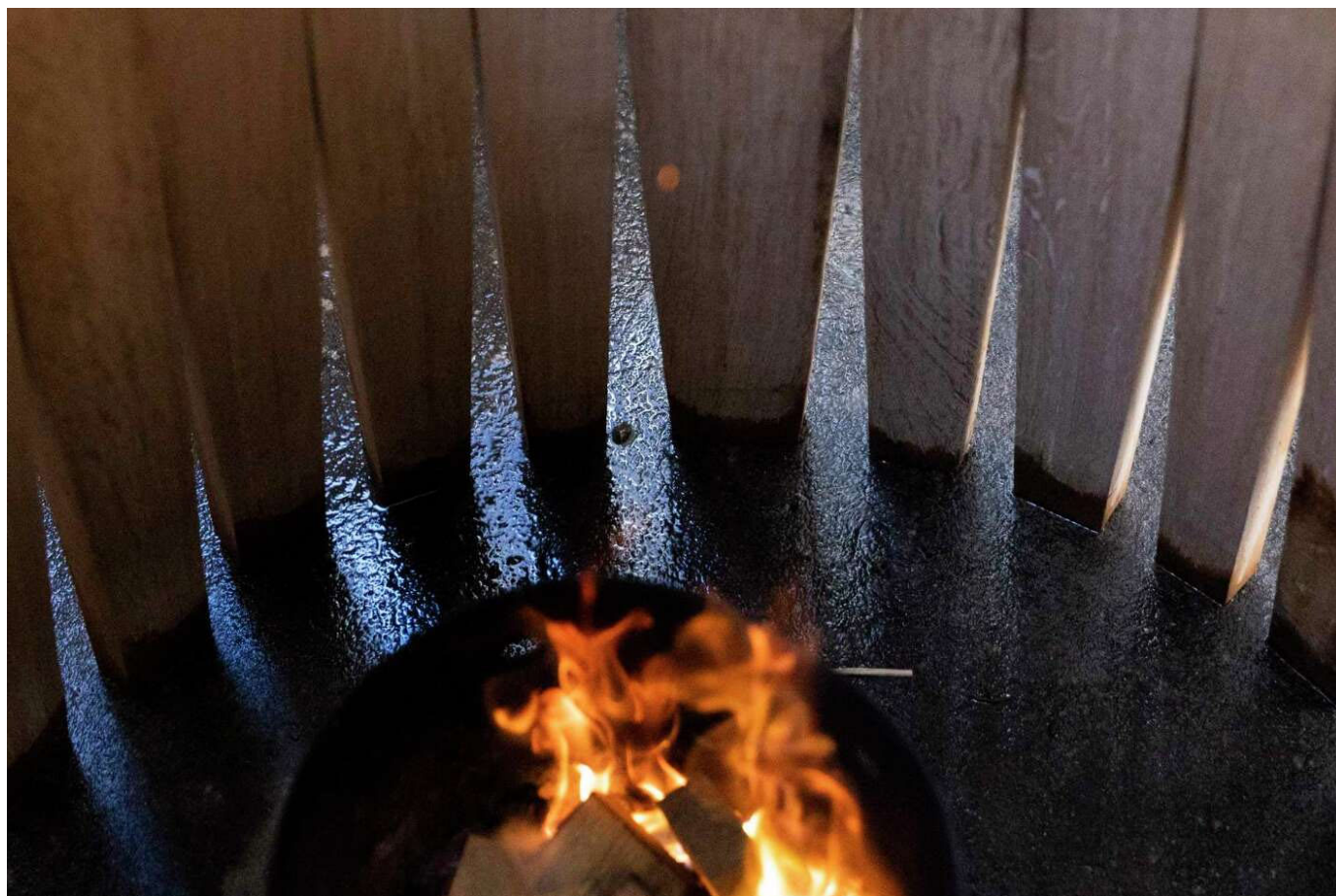
Most [wineries](#) purchase their barrels directly from a number of wine barrel cooperages, the majority of which are in France. But Ramiro works exclusively for two high-end Napa Cabernet Sauvignon houses: Caldwell Vineyard and Brion Wines. Brion founder Brion Wise said he believes Herrera is currently the only in-house cooper in Napa Valley — and one of only a handful across the globe. In employing him, the two wineries are following the lead of some of the most legendary producers in France: first-growth Bordeaux houses like Haut-Brion, Margaux and Lafite Rothschild.

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Just as wineries often purchase estate vineyards to have full control over the farming rather than buying fruit from others, hiring an in-house cooper is aimed at having better quality control, said Wise, who is also a partner in Caldwell Vineyard. For thousands of years, barrels have been one of the most important tools in winemaking, especially when it comes to red Bordeaux wines like Cabernet Sauvignon.





Ramiro Herrera (top) does a monthly barrel tasting for Brion Wines in Napa. Cables wrap around the base of a wine barrel as Herrera works to tighten the panels (left). An open flame warms oak (right) so Herrera can bend the wood. Photos by Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

Barrels, which typically cost about \$1,000 each to make, are primarily used for aging wines, particularly reds. Wines may be barreled for several months to many years; Cabernet Sauvignon, for instance, is typically aged for at least 18 months — often longer — as bigger, high-tannin wines need more time to soak up the barrel's impact.

Barrels add complexity and texture, soften acidic tannins and impart sought-after flavors and aromas like vanilla, caramel or chocolate on the wines. They are

responsible for “almost 50% of the taste of the wines,” Herrera said.

“It’s like having thyme in a soup,” added Wise. “It adds a component that wasn’t initially there in a grape.”

Caldwell and Brion sought out Herrera and his highly specialized skills a decade ago. He was one of the few barrel makers working in the U.S. to have completed a rigorous master cooper program in France. These days, he builds roughly 350 barrels a year for the two wineries.

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The job of a master cooper is to oversee a cooperage and train apprentices, but

the title itself is applied differently — and sometimes liberally — across the globe. Unlike the Court of Master Sommeliers, which created the master sommelier credentialing program, there is no single guild that sets the standard for master coopers. The most serious master coopers go to France to train in the centuries-old tradition, forgoing modern machinery and building barrels by hand. The few who graduate are among the most highly regarded in their craft.

According to Herrera, he was the only American in his four-year training program, which started with 48 students, most of them from multigenerational cooper families. An anomaly in the craft, Herrera did not come from a long line of coopers and instead got into the profession because he simply enjoyed working with wood. After answering a newspaper ad for a local Napa cooperage, Seguin Moreau, he was quickly identified as something of a prodigy and the company sent him to France.

nammo Herrera, the only American master cooper and the first of Mexican heritage, works to craft wine barrels inside his workshop at Caldwell Winery in Napa.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Thirty-two of his fellow students, Herrera said, were dismissed early on for not having a good enough nose; they lacked the innate ability to identify specific aromas in the barrels. In the end, Herrera said, only he and one other student, a fifth-generation cooper, graduated. That was roughly 30 years ago.

Herrera returned to Sequin Moreau for 20 years, training apprentices and traveling around the world to consult on barrels, but in 2020, his training became crucial.

Normally, he travels to France every year to select trees and build new barrels, which are later shipped to Napa. But due to pandemic travel restrictions in 2020 and 2021, Herrera instead built his rustic workshop at Caldwell Vineyard and had oak from France sent to Napa.

Lacking the high-end, modern machinery of French cooperages, he tapped into his apprentice training, designing his own tools and doing most of the work by hand. This physical process includes cutting the wine staves at a precise angle so that they fit together; sanding them down; hammering on the metal hoops that keep the barrel together; and bending the staves of each barrel with a delicate combination of water and fire.

A few other California wineries have tried to produce their own barrels. Fetzer Vineyards started an in-house cooperage in 1993 but it closed in 2005, a few years after the Kentucky wine and spirits conglomerate Brown-Forman purchased the family winery. Similarly, Beringer Wine Estates launched a cooperage in 2000. It was sold to a French-based cooperage in 2011, shortly after Treasury Wine Estates bought Beringer. Silver Oak Cellars acquired a Missouri-based cooperage in 2015. Named the Oak Cooperage, the operation produces

roughly 4,000 barrels a year, 75% of them for Silver Oak.

“Other cooperages — some make tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of barrels. If we’re buying a measly few barrels, we’re just not going to get the attention to detail like we do with our cooperage,” said Silver Oak owner David Duncan. “We’ve performed hundreds of trials over the years and we don’t get the same consistency from the other cooperages.”

Many winemakers would likely counter that sourcing barrels from multiple cooperages gives them a well-rounded spice rack to play with when blending vintages since each operation has different wood sources and a distinct style to its barrels. Wise, though, believes that the rising cost of grapes in Napa Valley makes it vital for a winery to be able to ensure quality and, above all, consistency.

“We’re approaching at least \$10,000 worth of fruit per barrel, and over the next two years it’ll likely be \$15,000,” he said. “The barrel is less than 10% the total cost, so you need to make sure the barrel is producing what you want. You can’t afford \$15,000 worth of grapes to go into a barrel that’s bad.”

Like Duncan, Wise also points to the lack of control and oversight when working with large cooperages across the world. “You get mistakes,” he said.

Instead, he believes, having one local master cooper doing all the work is like having a team’s best scorer — a Stephen Curry or Lionel Messi — in the game at all times.

“It’s like the head chef at a restaurant,” said Herrera. “He goes away and you have the same plate, but not the same flavor. It’s going to change.”

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Reach Jess on

Jess Lander joined the food and wine team at The San Francisco Chronicle as wine reporter in 2022. Based in Napa Valley, Jess has extensively covered California wine country for numerous national and international publications since 2014. In 2021, Jess published "The Essential Napa Valley Cookbook," a project that raised more than \$100,000 for Napa Valley restaurant workers impacted by the pandemic and fires. Jess hails from Boston, where she studied journalism at Emerson College and started out as a sports reporter before making the switch to wine.

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