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French Barrel Industry Faces Sales Slump Amid Wine Sector Struggles and Soaring Oak Prices

Producers turn to innovation and training as demand drops, costs rise, and winemakers shift preferences in a volatile market

Monday, September 22, 2025



Barrel makers in France are facing a sharp downturn, with sales dropping by 15% over the past year. The decline is closely linked to ongoing challenges in the wine industry, which has been hit by unpredictable weather, struggling grape growers, and disruptions

in exports to the United States following trade measures introduced during Donald Trump’s presidency. At the same time, the cost of French oak—the wood used to make barrels—has tripled over the last decade, rising 50% in just the past two years. This surge is driven by strong demand from China and other industries such as furniture manufacturing, all seeking flawless wood.

From April 2024 to March 2025, French cooperages sold just over 540,000 barrels, a significant drop from previous years. The decline was especially steep in France itself, where sales fell by 20%. The sector’s revenue also shrank by nearly 10%, reaching €515.9 million according to figures released this week. The industry employs between 3,000 and 3,500 people across all stages of production, from preparing the wood to assembling the finished barrels.

To cope with these changes, many cooperages have adjusted working hours and are looking for ways to innovate. Eudes Baufreton, general delegate of the French Federation of Coopers (FTF) and the Syndicate of Wood Splitters of France, explained that adapting to a changing market is now essential for survival.

One example of innovation comes from Oeneo, a major barrel manufacturer. On Tuesday, Oeneo unveiled a new type of barrel called “Twood.” Unlike traditional barrels made from solid oak staves, Twood uses two layers of wood fitted together mechanically. This design allows manufacturers to use up to half of available oak resources—compared to just 15-20% with traditional methods—helping address both supply shortages and rising costs. The Twood barrel is available only in a standard 225-liter size and can be ordered online at a price about one-third lower than conventional barrels. Oeneo claims it offers the same benefits for wine aging as traditional models.

Larger barrels are also gaining popularity because they are easier to handle and last longer. To support this trend, construction began earlier this month on a new training center in Cognac dedicated to teaching future coopers how to build these large containers.

Nicolas Tiquet-Lavandier, vice president of the FTF, noted that winemakers are also using their barrels for longer periods and increasingly rely on coopers for maintenance and repairs. While some producers are experimenting with alternatives like clay jars or

glass barrels, he said these remain rare and mostly experimental.

The taste preferences of wine drinkers have also shifted over time. The once-popular style of heavily oaked wines has faded since its peak under American critic Robert Parker’s influence. Today’s consumers tend to favor wines that are more drinkable and elegant. Tiquet-Lavandier emphasized that when crafted properly, oak barrels still play an important role in enhancing wine quality by adding subtle character and protecting the fruit.

Despite current difficulties, those in the industry recall previous cycles of crisis—from the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s to the global recession in 2008—and note that volatility seems to be increasing. For now, French barrel makers continue to adapt as they navigate a challenging period marked by economic pressures and changing tastes in wine.