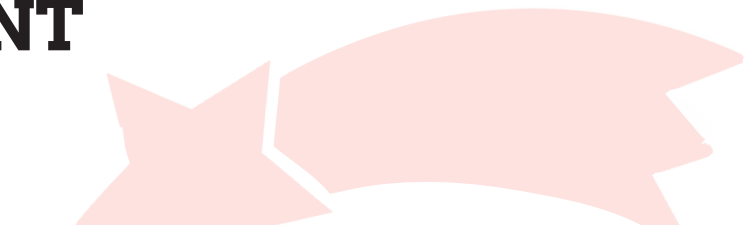


DOMINIQUE LAURENT BARREL OFFER

Burgundian micro-négociant, Dominique Laurent, has his own tiny, artisanal cooperage producing some of the world’s finest, rarest and arguably most unique barrels. Crafted from long-seasoned, tight-grained, thick stave Tronçais oak of the highest quality, the quality is such that renowned French wine critic, Michel Bettane, has nicknamed them “Magic Casks”. This name has stuck and become the official name for one of the barrels—the original version that Laurent still produces.

This micro-tonnellerie also coopers what may well be the only 100% guaranteed, old-growth Tronçais barrique on the market—“Le Pur Tronçais”—with the “Magic Cask” not far behind at 90% Tronçais wood. The ancient oak for these casks was sourced directly from trees in France’s most revered oak forest, the Forêt de Tronçais. Importantly, it comes from the original area of this forest that is known to produce the finest oak (planted during Louis XV Regency, between 1730 and 1750). These trees are not wild but were planted for harvest—at the time they were planned to be used for shipbuilding!

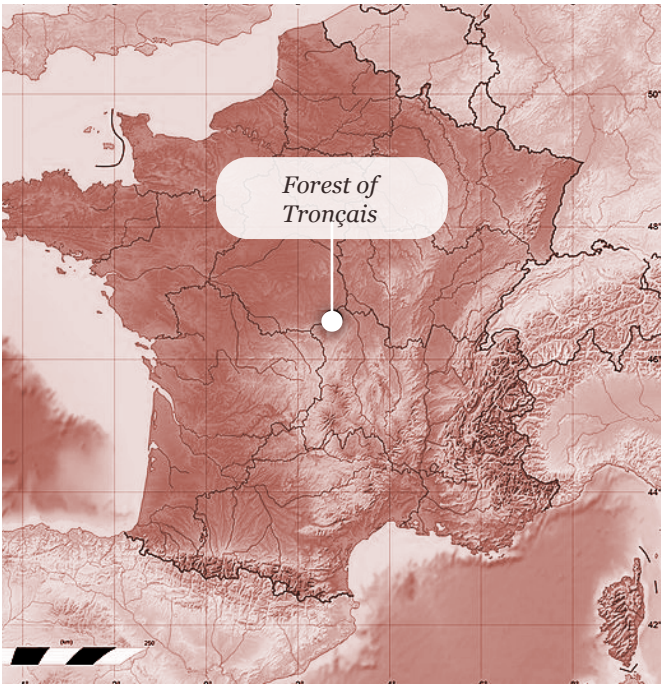
Laurent personally goes into the forest to select and purchase the trees, thus guaranteeing provenance. He transports these trunks back to the tonnellerie and, if you can visit as we have on a number of occasions, you will see these trunks marked with the stamp of origin. It has been estimated that three times the quantity of Tronçais oak is sold compared with what is



harvested each year, so provenance is important! Tronçais oak is now incredibly expensive, far more so than other French oak. Therefore, if you’re getting Tronçais-labelled barriques that aren’t far more expensive than the same cooper’s other barrels, something is wrong.

Dominique Laurent’s cooperage is located in a high wind/rain area of Burgundy, not far from Nuits-Saint-Georges, where Laurent is ensured the air-ripening of the staves is ultra-effective (there is no oven-drying utilised). The oak trunks are split along the grain, shaped, and then air-dried for a minimum of 36 months. They are far thicker (typically 50-100% more) than those used in commercial barrels, and therefore harder to work with. Keep this stave thickness in mind when comparing pricing—thicker staves mean more wood, slower work, and therefore a far higher cost of production. The heads of a barrel do not get heated and so Laurent and his coopers believe that extended aging of this wood is vital (they receive six to eight years of open-air maturation), yet another key to the quality of these barrels.

The cooperage today makes five types of barrel. All are made in tiny quantities and to the same exacting standards. In fact, the cooperage counts their annual production in the hundreds and Australia gets no more than 100 to 140 barrels per year in total.



Year in and year out, this artisanal cooperage’s methods remain the same: gentle yet lengthy heating (done exclusively by the head cooper, Benoit, whose motto “no smoke!” sets the tone) and bespoke fabrication by the same team of master coopers. The quality of the oak and the specialist work that is reflected in these barrels might seem to go hand-in-hand with the other cooperage we ship, Stockinger. Yet the barrels from these two tonnellerie could not be more different. Of course, the source of oak completely differs as Stockinger does not use French oak. Equally, the Stockinger barrels are the work of incredible precision where all efforts are directed to produce a barrel with a very subtle impact, while Laurent gives you the power and intensity of great, old-growth French oak—no holds barred. Having said that, with age the Laurent casks become increasingly discreet, delivering great wines for at least ten years, bringing texture and lifting the fruit in a singular way. With the right wines, these casks are indeed magical.

Sélection (228-litre)

Laurent’s Sélection is haute futaie (high forest/fine grain), sourced from the mountainous Chaux Forest in Jura (at 800 metres above sea level) and La Forêt Domaniale de Châtillon (in Burgundy). The fonds (the barrel ends) for the Sélection are made of Tronçais oak. The stave thickness is around 33mm (considerably higher than standard barriques) and they have been air-seasoned for a minimum of three years. It is worth noting that Laurent has been using more of the Sélection for his own wines as this is an entry-level cask of outstanding quality. It’s the most subtle barrel in the range in terms of impact.

Special Fine Grain (228-litre)

This is Laurent’s first new cask in as long as we can remember. The oak is sourced from Azy-le-Vif in the Nièvre (near Allier), where the cooler climate and sandy and quartz soils allow the oak trees to grow slowly and steadily. This imbues the wood with a tighter, harder grain with finer porosity. The staves are split at 34mm and are air-dried for 24 months outside. This barrel will receive the same type of heat and final wash as the Magic Casks. Indeed, giving us an idea of the quality, Laurent has anointed this cask as a ‘baby Magic’!

Magic Cask (228-litre)

The Magic Cask is approximately 90% Tronçais, with just 10% of the staves sourced from the nearby Allier forests of Dreuille and Bercé. The Tronçais component comes from France’s most revered oak forest—

the Forêt de Tronçais. It’s worth noting that while this is a naturally powerful barrel, Laurent (and many of his clients) use it with equal success for their white wines as they do for their reds. It’s a barrel that can live for decades and, because of the thickness of the stave, it can also be reconditioned easily and effectively. The thickness of the staves, the quality of the wood, and the artisanal methodology of production mean that this is something very special indeed.

Le Pur Tronçais (228-litre)

Total production of Laurent’s Le Pur Tronçais is limited to 100 barrels per annum. This is the only 100% guaranteed, old-growth Tronçais, thick-staved barrique on the market as far as we know. Considering the price for genuine Tronçais has more than tripled in recent years as the French government has put a clamp on supply, Laurent is now forced to charge more for this special cask. Again, ten years will not weary it, and the thickness of the staves means that reconditioning in the future can grant this unique barrel a second life (something that, in fact, applies to all the barrels in this offer).

Large Formats

This year, Laurent has again offered to produce some larger format barrels for us. These 500- or 600-litre barrels will be made with French wood mostly from Allier-grown oak. The wood is fine-to-medium grain and offered with 35- or 45-mm stave thickness. The staves are unusually thick (and thicker staves result in better quality), so keep this in mind when comparing pricing—thicker staves mean more wood slower work, and therefore a higher cost of production.



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