



Sonat and Robert Birnecker
of Koval, amidst 30-gallon
barrels of their whiskey.

SIZE MATTERS

SMALL BARRELS HAVE BEEN PART OF THE GROWTH OF CRAFT WHISKEY. GOOD IDEA? BAD IDEA? DO THEY ACCELERATE AGING? A FULL, FAIR DISCUSSION

BY CHARLES K. COWDERY

Balance. It's always a key characteristic in whiskey, but it's the essential concept for understanding barrel size in relation to whiskey aging.

In the United States, barrels that hold approximately 53 gallons have long been the standard. Since the rest of the world reuses American wood, it has become a *de facto* world standard too (though Scottish distillers usually reconfigure the staves to the larger hogsheads).

No one thought much about barrel size until a few years ago when small distilleries began to use small barrels. "They age faster!" was their blanket claim, which raised eyebrows and more than a few hackles. If small barrels, some as small as a gallon, do indeed "age faster," then why doesn't everyone use them all the time? No one *wants* to wait six or ten or twenty years to sell their product. Why *wouldn't* you use smaller barrels if they significantly reduce your wait?

Sadly, it's not that simple.

"The size of the barrel affects the rate of extraction, the rate of oxygenation, the rate of color development, and the rate of removal of undesirables," says Brad Boswell, president of Independent Stave Company, the leading supplier of new barrels to the American wine and whiskey industries. A whiskey maker has to consider all of those factors which, ideally, will be, "in balance with each other before the maturation is concluded," says Boswell.

For this article, we queried twelve craft distillers, as well as authorities such as Boswell. Just about everyone mentioned balance.

Tuthilltown Spirits, in New York, had early success with its Hudson Baby Bourbon and other whiskeys aged briefly in very small barrels. "Smaller is more costly but faster," says Ralph Erenzo, Tuthilltown

ANTHONY TAHIER

