

Home brewing tests some legal boundaries

By Melissa Maynard, Stateline.org

WASHINGTON — Americans have been brewing beer in their homes since colonial times — both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were home brewers. Even so, a recent explosion of interest in the hobby has created tricky questions for state alcohol regulators.

As of July 1, home brewing will be legal in all 50 states. But many states still prohibit home brewers from transporting their beer to club meetings or competitions. Some states also limit the amount a home brewer can produce in a year.

The remaining restrictions rankle home brewers, who say swapping samples and competing with other brewers is what their culture is all about.

“You could just drink your home brew at home, but you’d be missing out on a large part of the community,” said James Spencer, who hosts a popular podcast about home brewing.

Some states have been lax in enforcing such rules, but the hobby’s popularity and the growth of home brew supply stores is making it harder to justify a hands-off approach. About a million Americans brew their own beer at least once a year, according to the American Homebrewers Association. The group now has 37,000 members, up from 8,700 in 2005.

The tension has sparked legislative fights in several states. In 2010, the Oregon Liquor Control Commission shut down an annual home brew competition at the Oregon State Fair that had been held for 22 years. In response, the Oregon Legislature scrapped state restrictions on where home brew can be made and consumed, and legalized fees and prizes at home brew

competitions. Oregon home brewers also can engage in small-scale professional brewing at pubs.

Other states have taken similar action. Wisconsin lifted many of its restrictions in 2012, after the Schooner Home Brew Competition was spirited to a nearby city to appease uneasy city officials. And this year, Georgia and Iowa approved laws allowing home brewers to take their beer out of their homes. State lawmakers in Illinois and Missouri also are considering measures that would allow home brewers to participate in public festivals and competitions.

But the American Homebrewers Association advises its members to proceed cautiously in state capitols. "If it is technically not legal to share home brew at a club meeting in your state, but there has not been any enforcement of that law, it may not be worth exposure of home brew club activities, when changing the law is not guaranteed and could end up taking years," it says.

In some states, home brewing restrictions have deep cultural roots. The last two states to legalize home brewing were Alabama, which legalized it on May 9, and Mississippi, where it will be legal starting July 1. The legislation wasn't an easy sell in either state – in part because both still have dry counties and memories of moonshine.

"We've been working on this for five years," said Craig Hendry, president of Raise Your Pints, which led the campaign in Mississippi. "One year it was an election year, so of course they're not going to touch alcohol legislation then."

Alabama's debate was filled with filibusters and heated debate about the morality of allowing people to make their own beer.

"We're just completely opening up the whole state to alcohol – every family, every home, every block," Republican Rep. Arthur Payne said during a lengthy debate on the House floor. "I represent a district that has a strong family unit, and we

don't want to flood our neighborhoods with alcohol."

Alabama's anti-home brewing attitude was clear last fall when agents of the Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control Board visited Hop City, a craft beer and home brew supplier in Birmingham.

"They came in and raided us and said that we can't do any home brewing business," said Spencer Overton, a former commercial brewer who was hired to be the store's home brew manager. According to Overton, the agents threatened felony charges and confiscated \$7,000 worth of merchandise. "They took some books about home brewing, which was very 'Fahrenheit 451' of them," Overton said, referring to the futuristic Ray Bradbury novel in which firefighters torch homes containing books.

Since home brewing was legalized, Hop City has stocked up on home brew supplies and Overton will be teaching home brew classes.

State Sen. Bill Holtzclaw said he pushed for the Alabama bill because many of his constituents are NASA scientists who were risking felony convictions – and their top-secret security clearances – by brewing at home.

"It was easy for me to get behind this as an individual rights issue, and as an economic development opportunity," said Holtzclaw, a Republican.

He noted that many craft brewers started out brewing at home. "Rather than see it as threat, (craft brewers) see it as a way for folks who are really serious to leave the hobby realm and move over to the professional realm," he said.

During some of the state debates, local beer distributors have cautioned against allowing home brewers to act too much like commercial brewers without paying for licenses.

But most home brewers say they are determined to keep their craft distinct from the brewing business, even though the

required equipment and ingredients are expensive. "The spirit of home is not to make it to sell," said Spencer, the podcast host. "The spirit of home brewing is to make it to share."

Sometimes this involves walking a difficult line. At a recent home brew competition in Washington, D.C., sponsored by craft brewer Samuel Adams, participating home brewers were required to cover their own costs, and all proceeds of the sold-out event were donated to charity. "The beer is free, and Sam Adams is even providing some free snacks, but if you want to come you have to donate to a great local charity," the invitation said.

Josh Hubner, who heads DC Homebrewers, said his group negotiated a corkage fee with the hosting bar under a District of Columbia law that allows consumers to bring their own alcohol to a restaurant for a small fee. "If someone came and they said 'we want to drink the beer,' we'd have to give it to them," he said. "People are doing this totally for the love of home brew."

Hubner said he doesn't want it to be legal for people to sell home brew. "All I'd really want would be a general acknowledgement that this is something that people do, and that it is beneficial to the community," he said.

Nevertheless, home brewing has become a training ground for craft brewers, which is why brewing companies such as Samuel Adams and Sierra Nevada have become huge supporters. Samuel Adams sponsors an annual national home brewing competition and mass produces the winning beers.

According to data from the Brewers Association, craft brewing sales have been increasing dramatically and taking over a greater share of the domestic beer market. Total craft beer sales grew 17 percent in 2012 and 15 percent in 2011.

Jim Koch, who founded Samuel Adams, started as a home brewer and created the first batch of Samuel Adams Boston Lager in

his kitchen.

“Most craft brewing came out of home brewing,” Koch said. “This activity that used to be illegal everywhere has created 100,000 jobs in the last 30 years and probably encouraged the responsible consumption of flavorful beer. From the state point of view, the home brewer that you just legalized might be the employer of people in your state in the future.”

Koch’s advice to state lawmakers is to give home brewers the benefit of the doubt while putting reasonable safeguards in place: “Home brewers have an enormous amount of respect for the dignity of beer, so cut them a little slack,” he said.

Food map details what people in U.S. eat

By Mary Clare Jalonick, AP

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — Do your kids love chocolate milk? It may have more calories on average than you thought.

Same goes for soda.

Until now, the only way to find out what people in the United States eat and how many calories they consume has been government data, which can lag behind the rapidly expanding and changing food marketplace.

Researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are trying to change that by creating a gargantuan map of what foods Americans are buying and eating.

Part of the uniqueness of the database is its ability to sort

one product into what it really is – thousands of brands and variations.

Take the chocolate milk.

The government long has long classified chocolate milk with 2 percent fat as one item. But the UNC researchers, using scanner data from grocery stores and other commercial data, found thousands of different brands and variations of 2 percent chocolate milk and averaged them out. The results show that chocolate milk has about 11 calories per cup more than the government thought.

The researchers led by Professor Barry Popkin at the UNC School of Public Health, are figuring out that chocolate milk equation over and over, with every single item in the grocery store. It's a massive project that could be the first evidence of how rapidly the marketplace is changing, and the best data yet on what exact ingredients and nutrients people are consuming.

That kind of information could be used to better target nutritional guidelines, push companies to cut down on certain ingredients and even help with disease research.

Just call it "mapping the food genome."

"The country needs something like this, given all of the questions about our food supply," says Popkin, the head of the UNC Food Research Program. "We're interested in improving the public's health and it really takes this kind of knowledge."

The project first came together in 2010 after a group of 16 major food companies pledged, as part of first lady Michelle Obama's campaign to combat obesity, to reduce the calories they sell to the public by 1.5 trillion. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation agreed to fund a study to hold the companies accountable, eventually turning to UNC with grants totaling \$6.7 million.

Aided by supercomputers on campus, Popkin and his team have taken existing commercial databases of food items in stores and people's homes, including the store-based scanner data of 600,000 different foods, and matched that information with the nutrition facts panels on the back of packages and government data on individuals' dietary intake.

The result is an enormous database that has taken almost three years so far to construct and includes more detail than researchers have ever had on grocery store items – their individual nutritional content, who is buying them and their part in consumers' diets.

The study will fill gaps in current data about the choices available to consumers and whether they are healthy, says Susan Krebs-Smith, who researches diet and other risk factors related to cancer at the National Cancer Institute.

Government data, long the only source of information about American eating habits, can have a lag of several years and neglect entire categories of new types of products – Greek yogurt or energy drinks, for example.

With those significant gaps, the government information fails to account for the rapid change now seen in the marketplace. Now more than ever, companies are reformulating products on the fly as they try to make them healthier or better tasting.

While consumers may not notice changes in the ingredient panel on the back of the package, the UNC study will pick up small variations in individual items and also begin to be able to tell how much the marketplace as a whole is evolving.

“When we are done we will probably see 20 percent change in the food supply in a year,” Popkin says. “The food supply is changing and no one really knows how.”

For example, the researchers have found that there has been an increase in using fruit concentrate as a sweetener in foods

and beverages because of a propensity toward natural foods, even though it isn't necessarily healthier than other sugars. While the soda and chocolate milk have more calories on average than the government thought, the federal numbers were more accurate on the calories in milk and cereals.

Popkin and his researchers are hoping their project will only be the beginning of a map that consumers, companies, researchers and even the government can use, breaking the data down to find out who is eating what and where they shop. Is there a racial divide in the brand of potato chips purchased, for example, and what could that mean for health? Does diet depend on where you buy your food – the grocery store or the convenience store? How has the recession affected dietary intake?

"It's only since I've really started digging into this that I have realized how little we know about what we are eating," says Meghan Slining, a UNC nutrition professor and researcher on the project.

Steven Gortmaker, director of the Harvard School of Public Health Prevention Research Center, says the data could help researchers figure out how people are eating in certain communities and then how to address problems in those diets that could lead to obesity or disease.

"The more information we have, the more scientists can be brainstorming about what kinds of interventions or policy changes we could engage in," Gortmaker said.

But the information doesn't include restaurant meals and some prepared foods, about one-third of what Americans eat. If the project receives continued funding, those foods eventually could be added to the study, a prospect that would be made easier by pending menu labeling regulations that will force chain restaurants to post calories for every item.

Popkin and his researchers say that packaged foods have long

been the hardest to monitor because of the sheer volume and rapid change in the marketplace.

The Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation, an industry group representing the 16 companies that made the pledge to reduce 1.5 trillion calories, says it will report this summer on how successful they've been, according to Lisa Gable, the group's president. The first results from Popkin's study aren't expected until later this year.

Marion Nestle, a New York University professor of nutrition, food studies and public health, says the data could be useful in pressuring companies to make more changes for the better. Companies often use "the research isn't there" as a defense against making changes recommended by public health groups, she notes, and it can be hard to prove them wrong.

"What people eat is the great mystery of nutrition," Nestle says. "It would be wonderful to have a handle on it."

Spoiled food being converted into power

By Tiffany Hsu, Los Angeles Times

What happens to the 40 percent of food produced but never eaten in the U.S. each year, the mounds of perfect fruit passed over by grocery store shoppers, the tons of meat and milk left to expire?

At Ralphps, one of the oldest and largest supermarket chains on the West Coast, it helps keep the power on.

In a sprawling Compton distribution center that the company

shares with its fellow Kroger Co. subsidiary Food 4 Less, organic matter otherwise destined for a landfill is rerouted instead into the facility's energy grid. Though many grocery stores have tried to cut down on food waste and experiment with alternative energy, Kroger says it's the first supermarket company in the country to do both simultaneously.

The technology that helps transform moldy chicken and stale bread into clean electricity is known as an anaerobic digester system. At the 59-acre Compton site, which serves 359 Southern California stores, more than 100 onlookers gathered Wednesday to watch the system go to work.

Several chest-high trash bins containing a feast of limp waffles, wilting flowers, bruised mangoes and plastic-wrapped steak sat in an airy space laced with piping. Stores send food unable to be donated or sold to the facility, where it is dumped into a massive grinder – cardboard and plastic packaging included.

After being pulverized, the mass is sent to a pulping machine, which filters out inorganic materials such as glass and metal and mixes in hot wastewater from a nearby dairy creamery to create a sludgy substance.

Mike Vriens, Ralphs vice president of industrial engineering, describes the goop as a “juicy milkshake” of trash.

From there, the mulch is piped into a 250,000-gallon staging tank before being steadily fed into a 2-million-gallon silo. The contraption essentially functions as a multi-story stomach.

Inside, devoid of oxygen, bacteria munch away on the liquid refuse, naturally converting it into methane gas. The gas, which floats to the top of the tank, is siphoned out to power three on-site turbine engines.

The 13 million kilowatt-hours of electricity they produce per

year could power more than 2,000 California homes over the period, according to Kroger.

Excess water from the digester is pumped out, purified and sent into the industrial sewer. Leftover sludge becomes nutrient-rich organic fertilizer, enough to nourish 8,000 acres of soil.

The so-called closed-loop system was developed by Boston start-up Feed Resource Recovery and offsets more than 20 percent of the distribution center's energy demands – all without producing any pungent odors.

The program helps Kroger reduce its waste by 150 tons a day. The trash otherwise would have been sent to Bakersfield to be composted, hauled away six times a day by diesel trucks traveling 500,000 miles a year.

Kroger won't say exactly how much it spent on the anaerobic digester but estimates that it will offer an 18.5 percent return on the company's investment. The project, over its lifetime, could help the grocer save \$110 million. The supermarket giant is considering similar technologies for its La Habra and Riverside facilities and other Kroger locations nationwide.

The grocery chain's move, some four years in the making, comes amid heated debate over the nation's food and energy supply.

In August, the Natural Resources Defense Council reported that 40 percent of food in the U.S. goes uneaten – the equivalent of 20 pounds of food per person per month. The waste is shuttled to landfills, where it contributes to 25 percent of the country's methane emissions.

Some grocers have tried to cut back on garbage by putting less food out on display and even composting leftover products. Northern California chain Andronico's Community Market sells aesthetically marred but still edible produce at a discount.

The Austin, Texas, store In.gredients says it sends less than a pound of waste to landfills each month by offering reusable and compostable containers in-house.

Other chains try to reduce their environmental footprint through clean-electricity projects. Whole Foods Market said solar energy helps power stores in Berkeley, Brentwood and elsewhere. Wal-Mart is testing wind turbines, installing solar panels and fuel cells and says three-quarters of its California facilities use some form of green energy.

But in recent years, amid high waste disposal costs and uncertain energy prices, anaerobic digesters have gained favor. The technology has been proposed as a fuel source for data centers, farms, government buildings and other sites.

Nick Whitman, president of Feed Resource Recovery, said Kroger's new anaerobic digester in Compton may help encourage future installations in more urban areas.

"We've had to solve some really critical problems – sanitation, efficiency and reliability issues – that have plagued anaerobic digestion and prevented its wider adoption in the U.S.," he said Wednesday.

"We've been able to bring digestion out of the farms and off the composters and into cities and industrial centers."

Organic food movement hits Capitol Hill

By Mary Clarie Jalonick, AP

WASHINGTON – The organic food industry is gaining clout on

Capitol Hill, prompted by rising consumer demand and its entry into traditional farm states. But that isn't going over well with everyone in Congress.

Tensions between conventional and organic agriculture boiled over this week during a late-night House Agriculture Committee debate on a sweeping farm bill that has for decades propped up traditional crops and largely ignored organics.

When Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Ore., a former organic farmer, offered an amendment to make it easier for organic companies to organize industrywide promotional campaigns, there was swift backlash from some farm-state Republicans, with one member saying he didn't want to see the industry get a free ride and another complaining about organics' "continued assault on agriculture."

"That's one of the things that has caught me and raises my concerns, is that industry's lack of respect for traditional agriculture," said Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga., referring to some organic companies' efforts to reduce the number of genetically modified crops in the marketplace.

At the same time, Scott acknowledged that he and his wife buy organic foods.

Growing consumer interest in organics has proved tough for some Republicans on the committee to ignore. Eight Republicans, most of them newer members of the committee, joined with all of the panel's Democrats in supporting the amendment, which was adopted 29-17.

Rep. Vicky Hartzler, a Missouri Republican who owns a farm equipment business and a corn and soybean farm, said she supported the amendment not only because helping organics is good for agriculture but because many of her constituents eat organic foods.

"Organics are a niche market in agriculture with a growing

market share, so it makes sense for me to allow farmers to invest some of their own funds to promote their products," she said.

The amendment would allow the organic industry to organize and pay for a unified industry promotional campaign called a "checkoff" that is facilitated by the Agriculture Department but is no cost to the government. These promotional programs have traditionally been limited to individual commodities or crops, producing familiar campaigns like "Got Milk?" and "Beef: It's What's for Dinner."

The amendment would not set up such a program for organics, but it would allow USDA to approve an organic promotional campaign if the industry decided it wanted one. Laura Batcha of the Organic Trade Association says one reason the industry would approve a campaign is that many organic producers are concerned that consumers don't understand that products labeled "natural" aren't necessarily organic, which requires certification.

The organic industry has exploded in the last decade, with \$35 billion in sales and 10 percent growth just last year. There are more than 17,000 certified organic businesses in the country.

Producers of organic crops and conventional crops have long been at odds, as organic products have grabbed market share – more than 4 percent of food and beverage sales in 2011 – and the industry has advertised organic foods as healthier than other foods. Organic products are required to be certified by the USDA and are grown without pesticides and genetically modified ingredients, mainstays of traditional agriculture.

Government-managed promotional checkoff programs like the one that would be allowed under the amendment are required to be positive and not disparage other products, and some lawmakers seemed wary that such a campaign would be possible.

“How do I present organic pork without disparaging non-organic pork?” asked House Agriculture Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla., who opposed the amendment.

Mike Conaway, R-Texas, took issue with part of the amendment that would allow the organic producers to opt out of other commodity campaigns, an option that isn’t given to conventional producers.

“Looks to me like they have a free ride on this thing,” Conaway said, in an at times angry exchange with Schrader.

Despite the rancor, the chances that the amendment will become law are good, as the Senate Agriculture Committee added the same amendment to its version of the farm bill.

Schrader told his colleagues that embracing organics is essential to appealing to consumers in a time when big farms are often demonized by popular culture. He said that many young people are coming back to farms because of nontraditional agriculture.

“American agriculture is under siege,” he said. “Urban folks do not understand where their food and fiber comes from. ... The point here is to hopefully position American agriculture where we’re not always trying to catch up to what the American consumer wants.”

Study: Too little salt could be bad

By Allison Aubrey, NPR

Americans are repeatedly told to cut back on salt to reduce

the risk of heart disease. But there are new questions being raised about the possible risks of reducing sodium too much.

So, how low should we go? Currently, the government recommends that Americans should aim for 2,300 milligrams per day. And people older than 50, as well as those with high blood pressure, diabetes or kidney disease are advised to reduce sodium even further, down to 1,500 mg per day.

But a panel of experts convened by the Institute of Medicine concludes in a new report that “the evidence on direct health outcomes does not support recommendations to lower sodium intake ... to or even below 1,500 mg per day.”

Why? We asked the committee chairman, Brian Strom, a dean and professor of public health at the University of Pennsylvania, to summarize the panel’s findings for us. “The net conclusion is that people who are eating too much sodium should lower their sodium, but it is possible that if you lower it too much you may do harm.”

Strom says a lot more research is needed to better understand how ultra-low-sodium diets may be beneficial or harmful. Strom pointed to an Italian study of people with congestive heart failure as an example of research that has hinted that diets too low in sodium may be problematic for certain people.

“The people on the low-sodium diet actually did worse [compared to those on medium-sodium diets],” says Strom. “They had more hospital re-admissions and they had a higher mortality rate.” He says it’s unclear if the results would be the same for Americans with congestive heart failure, since treatments here are different than they are in Italy. But, he says, the findings raise questions.

The American Heart Association, which recommends a low-sodium (1,500 mg) diet for all Americans, released a statement stating that it disagrees with the key findings of the new report.

And some preventive health experts are critical, too. The World Health Organization has concluded that elevated blood pressure is the leading cause of preventable death, which suggests that staving off high blood pressure with low-sodium diets is an important strategy.

“Sodium reduction remains a critically important component of public health efforts designed to ... prevent cardiovascular disease,” Lawrence Appel of Johns Hopkins University writes in an email.

Appel points out that the studies that suggest that low-sodium diets are harmful tend to focus on “sick populations in which illness leads to low sodium intake rather than the reverse.”

Some groups of Americans, including older adults and African-Americans, are especially sensitive to the blood-pressure lowering effects of cutting sodium, Appel says. So the strategy of aiming for low-salt diets has “tremendous potential to reduce racial disparities in blood pressure-related cardiovascular disease.”

The bottom line, according to Bonnie Liebman, director of nutrition for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, is that Americans are eating way too much salt, on average about 3,400 milligrams a day.

“And we know that much is harmful,” she says. “It increases blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart attack and stroke.”

And she says focusing on the potential risks of a very-low-sodium diet distracts from the more important conversation about how to get Americans to start consuming less.

To better understand just how much salt is found in the typical lunch out, I met Liebman at a food court.

Our first stop was McDonalds, where it turns out burgers about

twice as much salt as the fries: 1,000 mg, and up to 2,000 if you get the Angus bacon burger, Liebman says.

Put the burger and fries together and you've already reached the recommended daily sodium intake. Liebman says it's a similar story at every chain, from Subway to Chipotle to Pizzeria Uno. (McDonalds has pledged to reduce sodium 15 percent across its menu by 2015.)

So even though the new study raises questions about potential harms of ultra-low-sodium diets, with a food supply like ours, most of us consume way too much salt, not too little.

Grocery stores slow to embrace Obamacare labeling

By Sarah Kliff, Washington Post

Back when it was passed just over three years ago, the Affordable Care Act included a provision to add calorie information to all chain restaurant menus.

Fast forward to 2013, and that requirement still has not gone into effect. While some restaurants took preemptive action and have posted calorie information on their menus, there's no final regulation that requires such information to be provided. What gives?

Bloomberg News' Stephanie Armour did some digging and came up with an answer: Big grocers have some big problems with the proposed requirement.

"The lobbyist for grocers including Kroger and Safeway is calling on President Barack Obama to curtail a U.S. health law

provision that mandates the companies display the calorie content of all their foods," Armour reported.

The Food Marketing Institute, which lobbies on behalf grocery stores, is supporting legislation that would limit the requirement to "only apply to stores that get more than half of their total revenue from restaurant-style food prepared on site."

A while back, I spoke with Brendon Cull, who handles government affairs for the Krogers chain, for a story that never quite got finished. The case he made to me was that grocery stores aren't fast food restaurants, even those that have small sit-down areas where consumers can purchase and eat prepared food.

Cull said if forced to comply, Krogers would need to spend \$20 million to come into compliance with the new regulations. And it's not just about buying poster board and listing calorie counts. It's about figuring out how many calories each item has to begin with.

"All those items have to be sent out to a nutrition lab," Cull told me. "That's a pretty big undertaking."

It's worth noting that the draft regulation, in its multitude of pages, included an option where grocers would not be included among the locations required to post calorie information; the regulations would apply only to a "restaurant or similar food establishment."

That's where Krogers would like to see the administration land.

"These regulations make sense for a restaurant, but that's not the case for a bakery in a grocery store," Cull said. "We might have thousands of SKUs for birthday cakes and thousands of types of prepared pizza. The problem is it forces us to label all of that, down to the olive bars and salad bars."

The final regulations are supposed to be finished this year. Then we'll know more about whether big grocers score a big victory.

Rhone wine event in El Dorado County

Five El Dorado County wineries in a region known for its handcrafted Rhone-style wines will celebrate local wine and food during the 10th annual Rocks & Rhones Festival on Memorial Day Weekend.

On May 25-26 Auriga Wine Cellars, Holly's Hill Vineyards, Miraflores Winery, Narrow Gate Vineyards and Sierra Vista Winery will pair locally sourced food including lamb, beef, honey and olive oil, with Rhone varietals like Syrah and Grenache. Vineyard hikes, barrel tasting and winemaker discussions will demonstrate the region's unique growing conditions and winemaking techniques.

The event is 11am-4pm each day.

Tickets are \$35 each day and are available online or for \$40 at the door.

For more info, call (530) 344-0227 or email info@pleasantvalleywineries.com.

Oak – a conundrum for wine aficionados

By Eric Pfanner, New York Times

AY, FRANCE – Want to start a fight at a wine tasting? Just mention “oak.”

Few issues get wine lovers as worked up as the question of whether to ferment or age wine in wooden barrels, usually made of oak. Doing so can help mellow the wine and add structure, richness and complexity. Done with a heavy hand, it can also smother the wine with the vanilla-like flavor of oak, obscuring its fruit, freshness and origins.

The use of oak increased in the 1980s and '90s as winemakers around the world responded to consumer demand and critical acclaim for ripe, powerful reds and plump, buttery whites. Then came the backlash. Now things have swung so far that some self-consciously trendy wine drinkers recoil in mock horror at any hint of wood, extolling the virtues of wines made in vats of stainless steel or other neutral materials.

Dining at a fashionable organic restaurant in London not long ago, I overheard a woman at the neighboring table tell her partner, “Mmm, this is a good Chardonnay; it must have been unoaked” – as if that grape variety grew on trees, making oak removal one of the necessary stages in the production of a good Chardonnay.

But when it comes to oak, at least one wine region, Champagne, is – forgive me – going against the grain. And you will find no stronger champion of oak than Claude Giraud, who runs Champagne Henri Giraud, a medium-size, family-owned producer in the grand cru village of Ay.

“There is no great wine without a great forest,” Giraud said

during a recent tasting at his winery.

Until the 1950s, most Champagne underwent its primary fermentation, during which the sugar in the grapes is converted to alcohol, in oak. (A subsequent fermentation, in the bottle, produces the bubbles.)

In the postwar years, however, many producers discarded their barrels and shifted to stainless steel. Giraud argues that this was about cost and expediency rather than quality; at the time, demand for Champagne was growing rapidly and fermentation in stainless steel is cheaper and easier to control.

I'm not sure these were the only reasons. While most of the big brands rely heavily on stainless steel for their entry-level bubbly, some of the greatest Champagnes, including Dom Pérignon, never see any oak, either.

"I wouldn't want to be dogmatic about it," said Michael Edwards, a British writer who specializes in Champagne. "It's also a question of taste."

But he added: "It's possible to make excellent Champagne without oak."

A few well-known Champagne producers, including Bollinger and Krug, stuck with wood over the years. More recently, small producers like Jacques Selosse have attracted a cult following with oak-fermented Champagnes.

But Giraud is dismayed that even the oak enthusiasts in Champagne mostly buy their barrels from Bordeaux or Burgundy, using wood from forests like the Tronçais, in central France, even though Champagne has a forest on its doorstep: the Argonne.

The cooperage business in the Argonne Forest survived the heavy fighting of World War I, when an Allied offensive pushed

through the area in 1918, leaving tens of thousands of casualties, as well as shrapnel that still scars many of the trees. Up until the 1950s, Giraud said, there were close to 200 coopers in the Argonne, supplying many of the Champagne houses. But now, Henri Giraud says it is the only Champagne producer that is still using wood from the forest.

Giraud has mounted a campaign to try to persuade his fellow producers to follow him back to the Argonne. He recently set up a partnership with the French National Forestry Office to manage the forest, and renamed his top Champagne cuvée Argonne in an effort to bring more attention to his cause.

“For a few years, Champagne has been reorienting itself toward quality, and oak barrels are back,” he said. “If Champagne really wants to return to its roots, it needs to come back to its forest, the Argonne.”

This is not about Champagne chauvinism, Giraud insisted. The oak of the Argonne is especially suited to making the local bubbly. Its tight grain has a more subtle influence on the wine than looser-grained oak, adding elegance and refinement rather than obvious oaky flavors.

Giraud has even identified distinct characteristics in the oak from different parts of the Argonne – caused, he said, by variations in the composition of the soil and the exposition.

Winemaking in France has long been underpinned by the principle that differences in vineyard terroirs – that is, the geology and geography of individual plots of vines – are the key to the diversity and greatness of the country’s wines. Does terroir matter to oak barrels, too?

To make his case, Giraud produced samples of unfinished Champagnes that had completed their primary fermentation in oak from three parts of the Argonne Forest. The differences were indeed striking, so much so that in one case a roomful of tasters, including me, misidentified one sample as having been

made from Chardonnay, when in fact it consisted of Pinot Noir.

Whether the subtleties of oak terroir are discernible in a finished Champagne is debatable. Most Champagne is a blend of wine from different vineyards and, often, from several vintages, so I'm not convinced that these nuances survive. Using different kinds of oak does give blenders a bigger palate with which to work, though.

There is also an element of transparency. Henri Giraud takes this to extremes, identifying every barrel in its cellar with a distinct code, specifying the origin of the wood.

Why does this matter? Camille Gauthier, one of the last representatives of an old craft called "merandier," which consists of selecting and preparing wood for barrel-making, said many French coopers use inferior oak from Eastern Europe, passing it off as top-quality French wood when they sell their barrels to winemakers.

"Traceability is just as important with oak as it is with horse meat," said Gauthier, referring to the recent scandal over the relabeling of horse as beef in European food products.

With oak, provenance is not the only variable. The size and age of the vessels also matter. Small barrels have a more pronounced oaky influence than large vats. Similarly, new wood leaves more traces behind than old oak – one reason many Champagne producers buy used barrels from Bordeaux or Burgundy.

Henri Giraud uses a fair amount of new oak for its top wines, including Argonne. The 2002 vintage of Argonne, the first to be released, certainly shows the influence of wood; it is a big, bold Champagne, with a deep golden color. It has a "winelike" quality, resembling white Burgundy in the richness, persistence and silken layering of its flavors.

Like some other Champagnes that are fermented in oak, this is a robust wine. Rather than quaffing it as an aperitif, you'd be better off serving it at the table. I kept imagining it with monkfish, though I'm sure other seafood or light-colored meats would be good companions, too.

Oak-fermented Champagne may not be to everyone's liking. Because oak breathes more than steel, many of them have the signature nutty note of oxidation, which can be off-putting, especially if you expect Champagne to taste primarily of bubbles and sugar.

I happen to like these Champagnes, though I object to the pricing of some of them. Giraud's Argonne, for example, starts at around \$223; for the price of a case, you could buy yourself a very nice oak table instead.

El Dorado County winery reuses bottles

By Mike Dunne, Sacramento Bee

Don't know what to do with those empty wine bottles other than toss them into the recycling bin? For ideas, go to the website Pinterest.

Judging by the photos posted there, old wine bottles can continue to provide happy service as hummingbird feeders, chandeliers, tiki torches, wind chimes and that all-time favorite, candleholders.

Brian Bumgarner advocates another alternative: Don't recycle the bottles at all. Instead, reuse them. That's what he's been

doing with a line of wines since he and his wife, Jennifer, founded Bumgarner Winery on El Dorado County's Apple Hill in 2005.

Their "Silver Fork" wines – the name was inspired in part by the nearby Silver Fork of the American River – come in bottles with a swing-top clip closure rather than a cork or screw cap. When the bottle is empty, the buyer can return to the tasting room and exchange it for a new bottle of the same wine at \$5 off the listed price. An empty bottle of the bright, rich, barrel-fermented 2010 Silver Fork chardonnay, for example, purchased for \$24, can be swapped for a new bottle of the same wine for \$19.

Bumgarner then washes and sterilizes the old bottle and adds it to his bottling line for the next go-around.

His interest in reusing rather than recycling bottles – indeed, his entire interest in the wine trade – began 20 years ago as he toured Europe. He was struck by the number of consumers who visited wineries, markets and the like to have their old bottles refilled with a favorite wine.

"They'd even come in with old Evian bottles to fill them up at grocery stores," recalls Bumgarner.

He was far from establishing his own winery, but that vision stuck with him, and today it fits right in with his philosophy to own and operate a business that is sustainable and locally oriented. The couple use the bottle exchange more for wines meant to be consumed in their youth rather than laid down for indefinite aging.

The return rate for the reusable bottles is running around 50 percent, Bumgarner said. The rest just may not have been exchanged yet ... or they're doing duty as hummingbird feeder, tiki torch or something else.

Bumgarner wines in more traditional bottles are marketed as

“Five Fingers” releases and include an earthy and oaky 2008 Tempranillo, a floral and fruity 2008 Petite Sirah, and an herbal 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon (recently sold out). The name “Five Fingers” and the handprint on the bottle are intended to convey the message that his wines are “personal” and “handcrafted,” Bumgarner said.

The newest and most impressive wine in that section of the couple’s portfolio is the Bumgarner Winery 2010 El Dorado Five Fingers Touriga, tantalizingly suggestive of musk in aroma, lush with red fruits in flavor, and pleasantly enduring in the finish.

It’s a husky wine, with sweetness from both fruit and oak, and firmness to its spine. Tannins aren’t so pronounced that they will interfere with the fruit when the wine is paired with a dish with appropriate mass, such as a rib-eye steak or a robust chili.

“Touriga” is the broad name for a family of black Portuguese wine grapes that include touriga nacional, touriga franca and touriga macho. In Portugal, they are used mostly for port, though some of the harvest also ends up as dry table wines. Wine-label regulations in the United States recognize only “touriga,” with no differentiation for the various strains.

Bumgarner came by the grapes that produced the touriga as he searched for fruit with which to make a dessert wine styled on port. That quest took him to Andrew and Elizabeth Standeven’s Shaker Ridge Vineyard at Shingle Springs. There, he got the Portuguese varieties he wanted, and also picked up a couple of extra tons of touriga nacional with which to make the dry table wine.

The grapes were harvested at a relatively low sugar level by Sierra foothill standards, but Bumgarner was convinced that they were ripe enough to yield the lively table wine he envisioned. He was so pleased with the result that he sees

touriga playing a bigger role for his brand, and toward that end bought even more of the grapes from the 2012 harvest.

(Because 2011 was an even more challenging growing year than 2010, he didn't get any touriga nacional.)

Bumgarner makes his wines at Fenton Herriott Vineyards in Placerville, but the couple pour the wine in a small converted horse barn just off Highway 50 at Camino in the heart of the Apple Hill district.

An adobe pizza oven built by Placerville earthworks craftsman Brian Evan Baker is just outside, while inside Nicole Berry oversees tastings with a knowledge of the wines and with a poetic interpretation of their impact refreshing for the trade.

Bumgarner also was a craftsman before getting into the wine business. He was studying music and building guitars in Sacramento before the commute from El Dorado County got to him and he began to look for work closer to home.

Thus in 1993 he began an 11-year stint with Boeger Winery in Apple Hill, where he worked the tasting room, the bottling line, the lab and just about every other corner of the business, learning the trade and eventually moving on to Primus Winery, also on Apple Hill, as winemaker.

In 2005, he launched his own eponymous brand by buying and processing 3 tons of Cabernet sauvignon, the variety that most intrigues him, despite its uneven history in the Gold Country. While at Boeger, he'd tasted some of the winery's Cabernet Sauvignons from the 1980s, found them "amazing," and remains enthusiastic about the varietal's potential in El Dorado County, though he's expanded his portfolio to include several other local varieties including touriga.

Bumgarner, incidentally, isn't knowingly related to San Francisco Giants pitcher Madison Bumgarner, though he

speculates they may be distant cousins. Many of Madison Bumgarner's fans about the country have found Bumgarner Winery, however, as they do online searches about the pitcher. The Giants' Bumgarner hasn't yet visited the winery. Brian Bumgarner hopes he does someday, and brings along an autographed jersey.

The winemaking Bumgarner will be waiting for him, with a Silver Fork wine in a reusable bottle in hand, ensuring his return.

Wine event benefits Tahoe Art League

The Cork & More is hosting a wine tasting event May 16 with a portion of the proceeds benefiting the Tahoe Art League's scholarship program.

The event starts at 7pm.

Cost is \$15. It is recommended tickets be purchased in advance by calling (530) 544.5253.

Cork & More is located at 1032 Al Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe.