**Oak Aged Beer**
Aging beer in oak barrels is a centuries-old practice that imparts the characteristics of the wood into the beer, which can add to the character of the beer. Home brewers have several options to recreate the flavour that barrel-aging produces.

**Oak Flavoring methods**
Three major methods are available to home brewers:

- **Oak Aging** – The simplest method – which involves adding sanitized oak chips, spirals or cubes after fermentation while aging the beer. Most home brewers add their oak shortly after fermentation completes and before bottling (i.e. in the secondary fermentation) and leave the oak in there until they achieve the desired taste – sampling every day or two. Some brewers with keg systems also add the oak to the keg itself, contained in a steeping bag so it will not block the keg’s dip tube. Oak aging can take anywhere from a few days to several months depending on the oak used and desired flavor level.

- **Oak Tea** – You can boil the oak to make an oak tea. Simply drop your chips, spirals or cubes in enough water to cover them fully and bring it to a boil for 10-15 minutes. Once the tea is complete you can add it a bit at a time to the finished beer until you achieve the overall beer flavor you desire. Making a tea is much faster than aging with oak, and also lets you more closely control the flavor.

- **Liquor Tea** – If you are looking to add bourbon, whiskey or your favorite liquor flavor to the beer you can make a tea using liquor instead. In this case you add the chips, cubes or spirals to a small amount of your favorite liquor (possibly diluted a bit with water) and let it sit for a week. Then mix the liquor in with you beer in small amounts until you achieve the desired overall flavor. Obviously moderation is important here as the liquor can easily overpower the flavor of the beer or wood chips.

**Using chips**
Wood chips are essentially shards of wood that you add to your fermenter (primary or or secondary) in order to achieve the level of barrel flavor you desire. Wood chips are probably going to float and that means a lot of oak will be making contact with the air in the fermenter and not imparting oaking goodness into the beer. So a handy tip is to place place the chips into a clean and sterile steeping bag and then weigh the bag down with something that is heavy, inert and easy to sterilize such as a few glass marbles. It’s a really good idea to do this as picking stray oak chips out of your tubing or bottling wand will be a pain.

**Sterilizing your oak chips**
Oak chips are porous and have a rough surface, which almost garantuees that they will carry microbes, which can (and probably will) spoil your beer if you don’t do something about them.

Here’s a summary of different sanitation approaches for adding bits of wood to beer:

1. Do nothing; just chuck in your chips in and see what happens. Some Belgian ales are brewed this way, and the flavours imparted by the bacteria are part of the beer's character. However, these
beers are not for everyone.

2. Boil the chips in water to make a tea, then add the tea to the wort.

3. Soak the chips in spirit like rum or vodka for at least 24 hours, and add it all to the beer. The strong alcohol content in the booze will kill off any microbes present in the wood. This will raise the alcohol content of your beer slightly, but that will be worth it because after 24 hours the alcohol will have extracted lots of flavour from the wood what would be a shame to waste.

How much oak chips to use
The amount of chips to use is not an exact science and depends on the beer style (the oak flavours will have to be balanced against the beer’s body, sweetness, hoppiness and what not) and is largely a matter of taste in any case. It also depends on what method of oaking you use. Recommendations vary from 10 to 75 grams of oak chips per 23 litre batch.

We would however recommend you start light and add more as you get more experienced and learn the effect of whatever form of oak you are using.

Soaking wood chips in bourbon
American brewers have discovered that if you are going to age beer in oak barrels, then those that have been previously used to age bourbon do a wonderful job. If you soak your oak wood chips in bourbon, you recreate this effect to some extent. We’d recommend that you soak your chips in bourbon for 24 hours at the very least.

Making an oak tea
Making an oak tea is easy. Simply boil the oak chips for 10-15 minutes and make sure they are covered in an inch of water. Once the tea is made, add a bit of the water to your beer in the fermenter and then taste it. Continue to add the oak tea until you reach the flavor you’re looking for.

Making a tea is much faster than aging with oak, and also lets you more closely control the flavor. The boiled tea will also be sterile.

How long to leave oak in the fermenter
Oak chips impart flavour pretty quickly, and usually 7-10 days in fermenter is about as long many brewers go before the effect on the beer becomes overpowering. Frequent tasting is essential, as the beer style and your personal preferences are the most important factor here. Too much oak doesn’t allow for complex flavors to emerge in your brew before an overwhelming wood flavor takes over the batch.

If you’ve put your oak shavings in a steeping bag, they’ll be easy to remove with a clean pair of sterilized tongs.

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