

French oak

Confidence in quality

The reputation of French oak has a long history in which forestry, the concept of local growing conditions and the know-how of specialists have all played a major role. Thanks to the professionals who have managed to maintain this tradition and develop it, French oak continues to be synonymous with top-class quality.



"France has the largest oak reserves in all of Europe". This statement comes from Rene Maechler, a man well-qualified to talk about oak. Firstly, because he is the director of a French company running a well-known sawmill near Strasbourg, in the Eastern part of France. And secondly, because this connoisseur of oak was elected Vice-President of the European Organisation of the Sawmills Industry, representing the interests of the hardwood sawmill industry. Rene Maechler is therefore an expert recognized and respected throughout Europe for his knowledge of French oak.

Looking at the production figures for oak in Europe, it is indeed true that French forests are considerably ahead of all other countries. For example, France produces twice as much oak as Germany each year, despite the latter being known as one of the "major" sources of hardwood in Europe. Oak accounts for one third of the forests in France, representing a surface area of more than four million hectares.

Each year, these oak forests grow on average by six square metres per hectare while harvesting is less than half of this standing volume capital. This gives an idea of the potential of the current resources available and the prospects for the future of oak in France. However, with three million square metres of logs exploited annually (see table 1), the French oak

harvest is equivalent to the entire harvest in other European countries, thus clearly demonstrating the dominant position of France in the sector.

This abundant resource is used mainly to supply national sawmills, a tiny portion of the sawn logs and other peeler logs being exported abroad without being processed on-site. Out of the 2000 sawmills operating within France, approximately 40% work with hardwood and concentrate on oak as their principal resource. With the necessary expertise to extract the supreme quality of a precious wood with a high material yield, French sawyers produce almost one million square metres of sawn oak timber a year – a stable production figure for the last ten years.

Famous vintages, a worldwide reputation

France is thus the leading European country in terms of quantity when it comes to oak, but is this statement also true regarding its quality?

"The reputation of French oak has spread well beyond the borders of Europe and today our oak has an unrivaled reputation in all world markets", says Rene Maechler.

This unsolicited reputation is not a recent phenomenon. It dates back to the 17th century, at the time when King Louis XIV asked his Minister of Finance Colbert to plant high-quality oaks to meet the needs of the royal navy. Today, renowned forests such as Tronçais, Berce, Citeaux etc., provide exceptional oak vintages and were originally planted more than 300 years ago.

Specialists do in fact talk of exceptional vintages for oak in the same way that the great French wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy are referred to. And all the barrels used to age in the same way the great international wines are made out of French oak, produced from famous forestry land.

Table 1: OAK in FRANCE

Surface area of French forestry	16,925,000ha
Surface area of Oak forestry	4,175,000ha
Volume of Oak/ha	159m ³
Oak growth	5.7m ³ /ha/year
Oak harvest	2,800,000m ³ /year
Production of oak sawn timber	900,000m ³ /year
<i>Source: Afocel 2008</i>	

According to wine experts, "The straight grain and fine texture in these oaks has grown at the slow and patient pace of temperate forests, giving the wood particular tannins which contribute to the unique flavour of these great wines".

This long forestry tradition which dates back several

centuries is now recognised through PEFC certification: all state-owned forests, that were formerly royal estates and which provide most of France's high-quality oak, many locally-owned public forests, as well as private production forests benefit from this guarantee of good governance.

A multiplicity of production derived from oak

In terms of sawn timber, European appearance grading standard "EN 975-1" guarantees the user that purchases correspond to known dimensional and qualitative characteristics and from rigorous selection. In addition to sliced veneer and cooperage, boules are a key component in the top-of-the-range French oak products available to customers around the world (see interview). But oak can also be used for a highly varied range of products with numerous uses.

Cant pieces used for railway sleepers or switch ties are available without chemical treatment as oak is naturally resistant to the vagaries of damp environments (class 4). Longer cant pieces, such as baulk, are used in construction. Selected boards, standard dimensioned lumber and strips have multiple uses in a wide variety of sectors: furniture, decoration, construction, renovation, carpentry, wooden flooring etc.

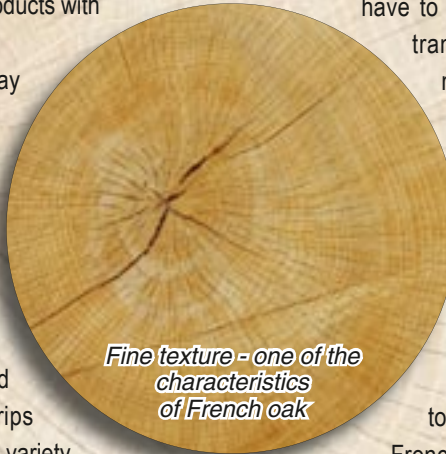
Square-edged oak timber is also a "made in France" speciality. It complements the range of boules used by craftsmen and in premium-quality applications, as square-edged oak is usually intended for manufacturers looking for more standardised products.

Wider than strips, and not exceeding 90 mm, square-edged timber is available in all dimensions and in qualities adapted to the requirements of purchasers. It also means that customers do not have to sort timber themselves, or transport and process waste material.

"Square-edged timber, also available in fixed dimensions depending on the order, is ideal for kitchens and wooden flooring, particularly in large widths", says Rene Maechler. From exceptional to standard quality products, French oak offers incomparable variety capable of satisfying the needs of a large group of users. **PFA**



Oak boules made in France



Fine texture - one of the characteristics of French oak



The boule, a top-quality French oak product



Almost 3 million sqm of oak harvested each year

The oak boule – a top quality product

Henri Mutelet runs the sawmill of the same name in a small village in Eastern France. Here, he talks to us about the oak boule, a product that he knows inside out.



Henri Mutelet

Question: "You run the Mutelet sawmill with your brother Jean-Marc, a company that mostly processes top-quality French oak. Tell us a little bit about your business."

Henri Mutelet: "We are a medium-sized sawmill like many in France, it being a family business founded more than a hundred years ago in 1899, and our children today represent the fifth generation of the Mutelet family. Thanks to this ancestral tradition, modern manufacturing equipment and a team of 25 highly specialised employees, we have certain expertise in oak processing, producing 12,000 m³ of sawn boards a year. We source our logs from the best forests in the Valley of the Saone and Burgundy which have highly renowned oak vintages from which we manufacture top-quality boules."

Question: "Can you explain exactly what a top-quality boule is?"

Henri Mutelet: "The boule (or "plot" in French) is made of sawn boards that are reconstituted into the original shape of the log, non-staining spacer stickers separating each plank. Mutelet is one of the rare French sawmills that saws the slicing quality usually intended for the production of sliced veneer. Because of this, the boules produced are of exceptional quality, but available in relatively small quantities, i.e. not more than 5% of the total volume of oak harvested from French forests. This means we are talking about practically unique highly limited pieces. In this luxury category, one could compare slicing to gold-plating and the top-quality boule that we produce to solid gold. Of course, after this very high level of excellence, there are boules of very good quality that are found in the butt logs of the best oaks. These products have minimum diameters of 55 centimetres, lengths of 3.5 metres or more, remarkable straightness and very few knots inside the wood. This selection is guaranteed by the appearance and quality grading of European standard EN 975-1 that the majority of French oak sawmills use."

Question: "What is the advantage of using boules?"

Henri Mutelet: "Boules come in large widths and lengths, allowing the user to achieve very high materials yields when processing the products into his finish products. In addition, as all sawn timber produced come from the same log, the wood is perfectly homogenous in terms of grain and colour. The boule is therefore intended for premium-quality applications such as furnishing and fittings. The boule really is one of French oak's truly noble products." **PFA**