

A Singular Vision of Excellence

By Michelle Locke

Associated Press

July 29, 2003

OAKVILLE, Calif. (AP) - The newest winery in the Napa Valley looks like one of the oldest. The owners of Nickel & Nickel took huge pains to keep the look and feel of the late 19th-century farmstead they converted into a single-vineyard winery.

The challenge they face is pure early 21st century: How to launch a luxury wine in a turbulent economy.

“The conditions that we have right now, some people call them a perfect storm,” said Dirk Hampson, president and director of winemaking at the new winery.

Economic clouds on the wine industry’s horizon include an oversupply of grapes and a still-shaky economy that is driving down prices. But that hasn’t crushed Hampson and his partners’ plans to open a new kind of winery, one where each wine is made from a single varietal – meaning type of grape, i.e. chardonnay - grown in a single vineyard, as opposed to using a blend.

“We are creating wineries that we hope on an international basis will survive for generations and therefore we have to be willing to accept the costs and dangers of these downturns,” said Hampson.

Nickel & Nickel was founded by the partners of the Far Niente winery, Hampson, Gil Nickel, Larry Maguire and Erik Nickel. The proprietor is Gil Nickel, a former guided missile analyst who also worked in his family’s successful Greenleaf Nursery, and the venture puts him in business with son Jeremy as well as nephew Erik.

Like many wines, Far Niente uses a blend of grapes from a number of vineyards. At Nickel & Nickel, the idea is to have each wine reflect the character of a single vineyard, a contrast Hampson compares to the difference between a soloist and a symphony.

“You can’t say that the symphony is necessarily better than the soloist,” he said. “Might be more complex, might have more layers to it and it might be your preference, but for somebody else the clarity and direct contact of the soloist may be their cup of tea.”

The new Nickel & Nickel winery in Oakville, California, is on 42 acres originally settled as a farmstead in the 1880s. Photo by Eric Risberg, Associated Press.

On a tour of the vineyards, Hampson points out the differences between vineyard soils, from the iron-rich red of one field to the cocoa-brown dust of another.

A tasting of some of the vineyard’s cabernet sauvignons - the winery has 11 wines in current release, long-term plans call for as many as 25 - further underlined the diverse characteristics of the wine, each tasting different but wrapped in an earthiness not usually found in blends. None of this comes cheap. Prices range from \$35 for a chardonnay to \$125 for a top-of-the-line cabernet sauvignon.

“Nickel & Nickel represents wines that are destined for the top five to 10 percent of wine consumers, who clearly can afford the great stuff and that’s exactly what they make,” said Mark Pope, owner of the Bounty Hunter Rare Wine & Provisions shop in Napa.

The Nickel & Nickel winery, which opened to the public in July by appointment only, has been planned for about a decade. The partners bought the site in 1998, paying the then-record price of \$100,000 an acre.

Things have changed a bit since then, with vineyards regularly changing hands for \$130,000 to \$220,000 and director-

turned-vintner Frances Ford Coppola raising the bar for all comers with the record \$350,000-an-acre he paid for a vineyard last December.

At the time of the purchase, the Nickel & Nickel site was home to a long-abandoned house that was more Bates Motel than country estate, and the new owners took some time deciding what to do with it.

“Everybody that’s grown up in this valley knows that this old house and this shed and this barn have always been here,” said Erik Nickel, general manager of the new winery and the person who oversaw construction. “We wanted what we built to look like it has also always been here.”

The new Nickel & Nickel winery in Oakville, California, is on 42 acres originally settled as a farmstead in the 1880s. Photo by Eric Risberg, Associated Press.

A 1770 barn from New England was shipped in to house production offices and, to accommodate modern needs, a 30,000 square-foot barrel cellar and press area was dug underground.

The result, is “probably the most ambitious architectural undertaking in Napa Valley since the building of Opus One,” according to Wine Spectator magazine.

Opus One opened in 1991, the dawn of a decade that would see huge leaps in the sales of California wine. Conditions look different in 2003, but Hampson and his partners are convinced they’ll prevail.

“I have no doubt that the concept’s right and the architecture’s right and the place is right,” says Hampson. “Now is our time.”

As seen in...

Boston Globe

Washington Post

Miami Herald

San Jose Mercury News

New Orleans Times-Picayune

Los Angeles Daily News

And on...

CNN Interactive

WBBM-TV CBS Chicago

KCBS-TV Los Angeles

KYW-TV CBS Philadelphia

WCBS-TV New York & WBZ-TV Boston