

Aug 4, 2003 — Nickel & Nickel: Napa Valley's Hottest New Winery Opens

What do you get in Napa Valley when you rub two nickels together?

A winery.

And it appears you get a new winery each time you rub a few more nickels together.

The first two Nickels that rubbed shoulders were brothers Gil and John Nickel who opened Far Niente, in Oakville, in 1979. John returned to Oklahoma to operate the family's business, the second largest family-owned nursery in the country. Gil put into place a talented management team, which turned Far Niente into one of the shining wineries of the valley with an annual production of 30-36,000 cases. And all they make is one red (Cab) and one white (Chardonnay) wine.

Over the last two years, a whole bunch of Nickels were rubbed together and last week, the efforts of Gil, Erik (a nephew and the winery's general manager and newest partner), and Jeremy Nickel (Gil's son, working in the winery's hospitality center) were presented to the public as the valley's newest, hippest, most-talked-about winery opened. The winery is called Nickel & Nickel.

As the same talented management team that runs Far Niente is in charge, one expects that wondrous things, and fabulous wines, will come from N&N.

But the stakes are considerably higher than they were in 1979 when Gil took over an abandoned winery in disrepair. For starters, N&N spent close to \$25 million on land, planting, construction and a 30,000 square-foot, underground chai where silky Cabernets will age.

According to Dirk Hampson, winery president and director of winemaking, even with Cabs retailing at between \$65 and \$125 a bottle, it will take seven to ten years to break even.

Read that sentence again; it will take seven to ten years to break even! Dirk, his partners Larry Maguire, Gil Nickel, Erik Nickel and winemaker Darice Spinelli, one of the few women in charge of a large winery in Napa Valley, are literally "betting the farm" on this winery project.

More than 1000 guests attended a gala launch party last week to celebrate the opening of the new winery. This cost an additional \$90,000 dip into reserves, but it was a way for the management team to share its excitement with the community. Winegrowers, winery owners and neighbors were invited to see what was new.

And there was plenty.

### Winery Highlights

+ For starters, N&N will ONLY make 100 percent varietal wines. There will be no blended wines whatsoever in any bottle.

+ Moreover, the winery will ONLY make 100% single-vineyard wines. The list of single-vineyard selections is starting to be the size of the petition to recall Gray Davis. It's 1-o-n-g. This year, for example, the winery is releasing 13 different single-vineyard wines, including one Zinfandel, two Chardonnays, two Merlots and eight Cabernets. What a departure from Far Niente, where you can taste everything the winery makes in two glasses.

Other striking things about the new winery:

+ They wash the grapes after they're picked and before they are pressed! Winemaker Darice says she knows of no other

other winery in Napa Valley that has ever attempted this. But think about it: You wash your produce when you bring it home from the store before eating or cooking it, so why wouldn't you want to wash off field dirt and schmutz before crushing your grapes?

"You'd be surprised at how muddy the run-off water is," says Darice, who dries the grapes with pressurized air before they're subjected to traditional winemaking practices.

+ The chai, where the wines age, is a single level pad underground. Every one of the single-vineyard wines is kept in designated areas so that evaporated barrels can be topped up with the correct, same-single-vineyard juice.

+ Above ground, great care has been taken to recreate and preserve historic architecture. A barn, originally built in New Hampshire in 1770 (233 years ago!) out of hand-hewn hemlock and white pine, has been moved here and painstakingly rebuilt to house the production team and winery laboratory. An authentic post-and-beam barn made from century-old reclaimed fir timber has been carefully built to house 30 acres of vines) sits, the BIG eye-candy is Sullenger House, a beautifully restored 1884 Queen Anne home, originally built by John Sullenger, a successful prospector of gold, silver and quicksilver who settled on the site in the 1880s. The Sullenger House contains tasting salons and has been decorated with period furniture and fabrics. It's as impressive inside as out.

## Terrific Wines

Nickel & Nickel is open to the public by appointment only. Tours begin at the Sullenger House where visitors will taste a flight of single-vineyard wines, to learn about the characteristics that different soils, different exposures and different elevations bring to a finished wine.

The "Terroir Tour," for example, examines a number of 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignons from the same vintage but each grown in a different Napa Valley location. (At present, N&N owns about 25 to 30 percent of the vineyards from which it gets fruit; the goal is to move to own about 50 percent of the vineyards, "but never more," according to Dirk Hampson.)

Visitors on tour will also be shown around the historic farmstead. They will visit the 5,800-square-foot fermentation barn, as well as the monstrous chai, or barrel-aging cellar underground, directly beneath the fermentation barn. The cellar holds 3,200 French oak barrels; the ceiling is vaulted with groin arches and all electrical, water and mechanical piping is hidden from view. The underground chamber is sumptuous, as are the wines from this property.

In an all-day tour of the property, a small pack of wine writers were offered a special tasting – one wine from every single vineyard, many wines from different vintages and we even got to taste current barrel samples in the actual fields where the fruit was grown.

What struck me from this day of tasting more than 20 superb wines was the uniformity of style, the common DNA, of these wines. They were all crafted by Dirk and Darice (methinks you have to have an unusual "D" name to be a wine-maker here) and their common purpose shows. Brilliantly, I might add.

Most of the Nickel & Nickel wines are juicy, with up-front flavors of ripe, red and black fruits, but they never sweep into the jammy, or sweet, side; the use of oak is restrained and despite the fact that we tasted so many wines, I never got splinters in my tongue from tasting so many young wines. All of the wines we tasted were balanced and despite their youth, many could be called elegant.

## A Tip about the 2000s

Many of the 2000 Nickel & Nickel wines are already showing beautifully and you can toss into the rubbish bin anything you may have read, or will read, about "less desirable 2000 Napa Valley reds, sandwiched between the stunning vintages of 1999 and 2001."

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