

Single vineyard wines in spotlight at historic Napa Valley farmstead

Thursday, August 14, 2003

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Eagerly embracing the challenge of producing single vineyard, single variety wines, the partners at Far Niente Winery launched a most unique wine venture nearly six years ago.

As some went about sourcing grapes for this ambitious undertaking, others set out to find the right property the new Nickel & Nickel winegrowing venture could call home.

A few weeks ago, partners Gil and Beth Nickel, Dirk Hampson, Larry Maguire and Gil's nephew, Erik, hosted a modern-day wine country hoe-down and barbecue to welcome neighbors and industry friends to their mid-valley farmstead, restored during a two year construction and historic preservation effort.

While the Nickel & Nickel farmstead is certainly a state-of-the-art winemaking venture, it is, by design, one with links to the past.

It's located in Oakville, just across Highway 29 from the well-known Robert Mondavi Winery, on 42 acres originally settled as a farmstead in the 1880s. The winery's collection of classic barns along with the property's original Queen Anne home brings this historic site back to life, while at the same time housing a contemporary winery capable of producing custom single vineyard, 100 percent varietal wines.

This conspicuous property was first developed by John C. Sullenger, successful prospector and owner of gold, silver and quicksilver mines here and in the Sierra. One of the area's early settlers, he had acquired the property in 1865.

Nickel & Nickel bought it in 1998 from Far Niente vineyard manager Alex Vyborny for \$100,000 an acre -- at the time an unheard of price. Grapes planted on the site had been part of the Far Niente cabernet sauvignon blend.

Including land costs, the project has cost approximately \$15 million to date. The partnership expects to lay out another \$5 million to build a second fermentation barn, a loading dock barn, a bottling line and to restore existing sheds and outbuildings.

The goal of the partnership was not only to develop a modern winery but also to respect the history of the site, noted Dirk Hampson, president and director of winemaking at Nickel & Nickel.

The fermentation cellar was finished first so workers could accept grapes from last fall's harvest, the first crush on the property, said Hampson.

He admitted the Nickel & Nickel winemaking venture is ambitious and a bit risky. At a time when the market is soft and Americans have been gobbling up so-called "super-value" wines, Nickel & Nickel is making numerous small lots of 100 percent varietal wines from single vineyard locations. And the wines will not be sold off at bargain prices, offered in retail shops at \$65 to \$125 per bottle.

"We want consumers to be able to see how a vintage treats parts of the Napa Valley differently," Hampson enthused. He explained during a media vineyard tour that's why Nickel & Nickel has four cabernets from Oakville as well as other several grape varieties each from differing microclimates within the Napa Valley.

"Our single vineyard wines are about the personality of each site," he added, pouring eager journalists a taste of the cabernet sauvignon from his own property, Dragonfly Vineyard in St. Helena, along with cabernets from Rock Cairn (owned by the Pelissa/Hoxsey families at the southern limits of the Oakville appellation), the Stelling Vineyard (which is

the base wine for the Far Niente blend) and Sullenger Vineyard (the home vineyard of Nickel & Nickel).

Built in the 1880s by miner John C. Sullenger, this Queen Anne home was restored as part of the Nickel & Nickel wine farmstead in Oakville.

Stepping forward into the past

The Sullenger home and farmstead buildings at the Nickel & Nickel site are arranged around three sides of a barnyard, surrounded by olive trees and a white three-rail fence.

Visitors will be welcomed at the restored 1884 Queen Anne home built by Sullenger from the profits of his mines. The Sullenger house includes tasting salons and an open-air wrap-around porch on the main level, as well as a large cellar space to be used for hospitality events.

“Anyone driving past on Highway 29 will see a restored farmstead that appears to have been there for generations, without realizing the classic barns house an extremely sophisticated winery,” added Hampson.

One of those barns was originally erected circa 1770 in Meriden, N.H., by the Gleason family. The 3,000 square foot pre-Revolutionary War-era hay barn was spared demolition when it was purchased in 2001.

After nearly two years spent dismantling the barn, designing blueprints, restoring and saving the original hand-hewn white pine and hemlock beams, fashioned in post-and-beam, wood-pegged construction, the barn was shipped in pieces to the Napa Valley. It was reassembled at the winery earlier this year to house offices and a laboratory for the winemaking staff.

The barn’s red exterior siding has weathered to a lovely, aged patina and its haylofts and animal stalls have been turned into glass-walled offices and lab space, retaining the floor-to-ceiling open feeling of the barn.

The adjacent 5,800 square foot fermentation barn is made from reclaimed century-old fir beams and has been assembled using age-old techniques of hand-joinery for post-and-beam construction common in the 1880s.

The 19th century style building houses 21st century equipment uniquely suited to custom making small lot, single vineyard wines, including 26 computer- and temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks of three sizes, floating aluminum catwalks and night flow air ventilation.

Entered from a descending stairway housed in a traditional stone outbuilding, a subterranean barrel cellar is a dramatic interpretation of what a member of the partnership recalls seeing at a European monastery. Vaulted ceilings and groin arches conceal pipes, electrical and mechanical systems necessary for wine production. Radiant cooling in both floor and ceiling maintain ideal cellar temperature. The cellar excavation -- about one acre in size -- began in the summer of 2001 and required digging 12 feet down, below the water table. This cellar is large enough to house 3,200 French oak barrels.

Manager for this daunting project was Erik Nickel, who is now serving as general manager for Nickel & Nickel Winery. The project’s general contractor was James Nolan Construction, of Napa. Landscaping -- which includes 32-foot Canary palm trees at the front and rear of the Sullenger house and a forest of River Birch, Weeping Willow, Arbutis, and Japanese Maple trees -- was done by Napa Valley’s Townsend Garden Design.

Tours and production

Tours at Nickel & Nickel are by appointment only. Offered four times daily, they include a walk through the historic farmstead and tastings conducted a bit differently than at other wineries in the valley.

Tastings are presented in flights, enabling visitors to taste wines from various vineyards side-by-side, with the goal of allowing the taster to see how each vineyard produces distinctive wine.

As an example, notes hospitality director Helene Weiss, the “Terroir Tour” examines a collection of 100 percent cabernet sauvignons of the same vintage, but grown in different soils and microclimates.

“This tasting will show how vineyard location, soil, exposure and farming methods affect the expression of flavors and profile of a single grape variety,” Weiss points out.

Tastings of single vineyard varietal wines other than cabernet sauvignon are also offered.

While 13 Nickel & Nickel wines will be in release this year, long range plans call for production of as many as 25 100 percent varietal, single vineyard wines from chardonnay, merlot, pinot noir, zinfandel, syrah and cabernet sauvignon.

Heading up the production team since 1998, winemaker Darice Spinelli is also responsible for sourcing vineyards to meet production plans.

“We’re not just seeking out any vineyard,” Spinelli advised. “Every aspect of each vineyard must be top-notch, including the soil and the climate, but we also want to know the site is proven ground. We look at who the neighbors are, who is the vineyard manager and will that grower be willing to do whatever it takes to make the best of the vineyard.”

Last year, Nickel & Nickel harvested enough fruit to produce 17,000 cases of wine. Spinelli expects production to increase by 3,000 cases this year. While Nickel & Nickel’s use permit allows for production of 50,000 cases of wine each crush, the partnership expects it will level off at half that amount for the foreseeable future.

By comparison, Far Niente produces between 30,000 and 36,000 cases of chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon each harvest.

Current releases include two chardonnays -- 2001 St. John’s Creek Vineyard (Coombsville) and 2001 Truchard Vineyard (Carneros) -- and two merlots -- 2000 Suscol Ranch (Jamieson Canyon) and 2000 Harris Vineyard (Oakville). There’s also a zinfandel from Russian River Valley, 2000 Ponzio Vineyard. A half-dozen 1999 cabernets are also in current release -- from Oakville, Sullenger Vineyard, Stelling Vineyard, Tench Vineyard and Rock Cairn Vineyard; from St. Helena, the Dragonfly Vineyard; and from Coombsville, the Carpenter Vineyard.

While the prospect of selling numerous single vineyard wines from the same cellar to consumers and restaurateurs is daunting to most, Hampson feels it’s all about education.

“It may take a little time, but I think people who enjoy wine will appreciate that we’re giving them an expression of a particular place,” he added. “Restaurants may want to carry several of our Oakville cabernets, for example, so diners can make that comparison over a meal.

“Curious people coming through the tasting room is the way Nickel & Nickel will sell its wines. It’s the best way to educate people.”

Tours and tastings at Nickel & Nickel are available by appointment seven days a week. They can be scheduled by contacting the winery at (707) 967-9600 or by sending an e-mail inquiry to info@nickelandnickel.com.

A tour and tasting of five current releases costs \$25, the terroir tour is \$30 per person.