

DARICE SPINELLI

Age: 37

Winery: Nickel & Nickel

Like asking a mother to choose her favorite child, Darice Spinelli is, at first, hesitant to name her favorite among Nickel & Nickel's 14 wines.

She quickly admits to her love for Cabernet, and then the rest comes pouring out.

"My favorite of our vineyards is Stelling. It is truly a special place," Spinelli says. "It sort of moderates itself: The clusters are loose, the berries are smaller and in the fermenter, they give off this incredible blackberry aroma. It's got everything!"

A Napa native, Spinelli attended Vintage High School. She studied biology at UC Santa Barbara and then became distracted by genetics and biochemistry.

She returned home in 1988 to figure out her direction and took a job at Inglenook.

"I remember thinking to myself, 'Hey, this is fun. Why didn't I think of this before?'" Spinelli says, laughing.

She later joined the Franciscan Group, where she served as quality control director. In 1992, Spinelli was promoted to winemaker at the Mount Veeder Winery property when Peter Franus left to establish his own label.

Soon Spinelli, who has a way with boisterous tannins, became known as "the woman who tamed Mount Veeder."

Nickel & Nickel just opened to the public this summer. But Spinelli has been on the job since 1998. This is the third winery founded by the late Gil Nickel. The former Oklahoma nurseryman turned vintner died Oct. 30. His son, Erik, and a group of partners, also own Far Niente and Dolce.

Sans fancy degrees in enology or viticulture, Spinelli, who is also married and the mother of two young boys, was handed the keys to this \$25 million castle.



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Situated on 42 of Oakville's priciest acreage (a record \$100,000 each in 1999), the property features a restored 1840s Queen Anne Victorian farmhouse and a 30,000-square-foot barrel cave with radiant heating. The office is a pre-Revolutionary War hay

barn (spared from destruction by Nickel & Nickel's purchase) that was shipped from New Hampshire and re-assembled.

At Nickel & Nickel, *terroir* is the *raison d'être*.

The current crop of wines

(Chardonnay, Merlot, Zinfandel and Cabernet), all 100 percent varietal, are grown at individual vineyards spread throughout the valley. About 40 percent of the vineyards are owned by Nickel & Nickel; the rest are grapes purchased from single-vineyard growers. Current production is about 10,000 cases.

Prices range from \$35 to \$125 per bottle.

The price may also reflect the fact that time (read: money) is spent washing the grapes before crush — a practice Spinelli believes is unique in the valley.

Aside from the rigors of crush, Spinelli also spends a lot of time in her car driving to and from the winery's vineyards. It's not surprising, then, that during the season, there are days when she doesn't see her children at all.

"Just last night I was here until 9:30 p.m.," says Spinelli. "But my husband and the boys brought over dinner for the whole crew. And my 4-year-old stayed and drew pictures while we finished work."

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The challenge of running single-vineyard wineries is that every vineyard must perform well for the program to work. Spinelli's challenge is then to highlight what is special about each.

"My favorite part is the hands-on ability to take it from the grape to the bottle."

"I even tell my growers, 'I can't make steak out of hamburger. You give me stellar fruit and I can make a fabulous wine.'"

— Catherine Bigelow