

Behind the berm:

What's being built beyond that mound of dirt outside of Oakville, and why is this man smiling about it? Antique techniques make for a really old fashioned barnraising.

By Contributor Larry Fiori

photos by Larry Fiori. Dutch Master Carpenter Peter Van Diepen on the construction site of Far Niente Winery's new cellars. Van Diepen is dressed in the traditional work clothes befitting his status. "The eight buttons on my vest stand for the hours of work I do each day. The six buttons on my coat stand for the number of days a week we work in the Guild," he said.

About six months ago, just north of Oakville, a berm began growing in front of the 19th century Sullenger farmstead and people began to talk. A few weeks ago, a large, heavy-timbered frame structure started appearing in the background and these same people found themselves in a justifiable quandary.

Some of the answers come from Eric Nickel, nephew of Gill Nickel, owner of Far Niente Winery. According to Nickel, the family is in the process of building the new Nickel & Nickel winery on the property. The berm is the result of removing over 30,000 square feet of earth for the underground cellars.

Nickel said that two old-fashioned farm buildings will be constructed above the cellars, the first of which will be visible from Highway 29. From a distance, the dark and powerful silhouette stands in sharp contrast to any other structure near it such as Opus One, Turnbull Winery and Mondavi.

"We have beautiful architecture all around us," said Dirk Hampson, partner and director of winemaking at Far Niente, in regard to the rationale for its unique design. "Some of it is quite famous. I've always wanted to do a post-and-beam barn and the owners saw that it would fit beautifully with our image of this location."

Hampson pointed out that the 42-acre property also includes the John Crawford Sullenger Queen Anne home and barns that were built in the 1880's. Under the master plan, these buildings will also be reconstructed. "As owners of Far Niente, we already have experience restoring old wineries and going the extra step seemed like the natural thing to do," he said.

Mitch Hamilton, superintendent with the general contractor, James Nolan Construction Company, added, "We've spent the past six months putting in the cellar and we know people have been wondering what we've been doing. It has only been in the last two weeks that the barn has gone up."

The project has been Hamilton's baby.

"We have a pretty aggressive schedule because we plan to be ready by crush time this fall. At times, I've had as many as 50 men on the job to stay on schedule," he said.

The centuries-old design used for the barn is the brainchild of Leif Calvin, owner of Timber Creations, a custom builder out of Santa Rosa. Using stout posts and beams that came from old buildings, train trusses and mine shafts, Calvin said the structure has been carefully assembled. His men are using age-old methods of hand-joinery – including dovetail locks and mortised posts and beams – and pegging commonly used in late 19th and early 20th century construction. "We use the older, recycled wood because it is a better product," Calvin said. "The wood, after it's planed, is cabinet grade. It's dry, not going to twist anymore and it takes oil very nicely."

Calvin's three-man crew of carpenters include Mark Sowers, Steve Sobieski and his newest member, Peter van Diepen, a master carpenter from Holland who wears traditional guild work clothes befitting his status and complementing the historic nature of the project.

"My outfit is based on the dress code we've had in Holland for over 100 years," said Diepen. "It starts with a black floppy hat, white pleated shirt, black vest, coat and trousers. Everything about it has a special meaning."

Even the buttons on his clothes remind him of his heritage. “The eight buttons on my vest stand for the eight hours of work I do each day. The six buttons on my coat stand for the number of days a week we work in the Guild.”

He said the set of three buttons on each sleeve stand for the three years of his early apprenticeship and the three years of foreign travel he must do in order to expand his working knowledge.

“I’ve already been to Germany, China, Mongolia and now, the United States,” he replied. A bright metal Guild pin on his thin black tie depicts a two-man saw, a broad ax and a compass. According to tradition, he never has to take off his hat in deference to anyone. “We try to catch him without it on, but it’s hard,” said Calvin. “He knows his stuff.”

Hampson and Hamilton continued the tour of the large barn structure, pointing out some of the specialized construction.

“We’re going to great lengths to conceal all the mechanical aspects of the building - above and under the ground,” said Hamilton.

According to Hampson, the building will have radiant cooling in the floors and ceiling of the barrel room that will have a capacity for about 3,000 barrels.

“When you walk in here, it will look like a barn built a hundred years ago; except we will enjoy all the benefits of modern wine making technology.”

Hampson, who is involved in every detail of the construction, eagerly anticipates the reaction of the public to his new winery.

“You just don’t see this kind of construction anymore. Every joint is hand-fitted with wood that stopped shrinking eighty years ago. These old woods will have a chance to live a whole new life as part of our winery,” he said. “A lot of the barn technology came from Holland. Some originated in England and some in America. In a way, we’ve had a joining of cultures in making this barn. When people go inside, we just want them to smile!”

Additional smiles will be the goal when the historic Queen Anne farmhouse is restored for use as retail and hospitality space and administrative offices. Hampson said they are also planning to bring in an old barn from Vermont to add to the project.

“We heard about a barn that was built in 1770 from a man who finds and restores these old buildings,” Hampson said. “Rather than let this historic barn decay, we’re going to fix it up and bring it here where it will be Napa’s oldest structure.”

He said this imported building will be used as the office for Darice Spinelli, Nickel & Nickel’s Winemaker, and other employees.