



Norm Roby

Singled out

Ever since the concept of 'cult' wines took hold in Bordeaux to divert attention away from California's cult Cabernets, pundits have been asking what happens next. Gil Nickel of Napa Valley's Far Niente winery, which is committed to bottling estate-grown Cabernet Sauvignon, may have the answer. He has built a new and ultra hi-tech winery just north of Opus and will construct a 2,787m² underground cellar for barrel ageing. His latest project is named Nickel & Nickel and is devoted to making only single-vineyard wines. Nickel hired a super winemaker with an impressive CV, Darice Spinelli, to handle both the sourcing of vineyards and the crafting of its wines. The plan calls for her to make 25–30 small-lot, single-vineyard wines.

Owned by Gil and his son Jeremy, along with Dirk Hampton and Larry Maguire, Nickel & Nickel's first vintage of 1997 was released in 2000, and consisted of four single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignons.

Merlot, Chardonnay and Zinfandel have also appeared under the Nickel & Nickel label. Syrah and Pinot Noir will eventually become part of this single-vineyard portfolio. Over the first three vintages, the case production for each single-vineyard wine falls within the 200–600 range. Prices range from \$45 for Zinfandel to just under \$100 for Cabernet Sauvignon from the Stelling Vineyard.

Made from 100% Cabernet and aged in new and one-year-old French oak, the Nickel & Nickel wines have a classic California style. My favourite of the 1997s is the Stelling Vineyard Cabernet, a wine with a sense of elegance and balance to give it complexity and long ageing potential. Located in the western hills of the Oakville appellation, the Stelling Vineyard is big, but over its first three vintages the Nickel & Nickel Stelling Cabernet is made from a tiny (0.5-hectare) parcel.

Single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon is not new to California. Heitz Cellars with its 'Martha's Vineyard' Cabernet first caught our attention with the release of the 1966. In 1970 Freemark Abbey joined in with an often brilliant Cabernet from the Bosche Vineyard. If there is anyone entitled to say, 'I told you so,' it has to be Al Brounstein who has been offering three single-vineyard Cabernets since 1972. He now finds himself at the head of the parade.

Norm Roby is a co-author of the best-selling New Connoisseur's Handbook of Californian Wine