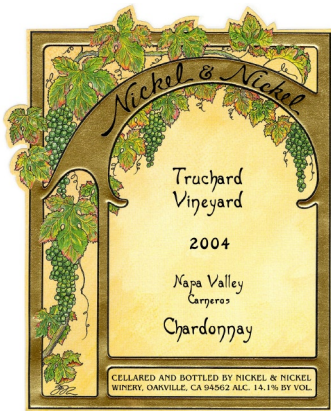


KOEPPPEL ON WINE



May 20, 2006



Nickel & Nickel Truchard Vineyard Chardonnay 2004

Carneros, Napa Valley, California
100% chardonnay
Excellent

This wine delivers exactly what I want in a top-level chardonnay: It's rich, ripe, spicy and flavorful but simultaneously pure and intense, spare, almost austere. Nickel & Nickel chardonnays see no malo-lactic "fermentation" – the chemical process that occurs in barrel whereby crisp malic (apple-like) acid is transformed to creamy lactic (milk-like) acid – so its richness, resonance and opulence (with no trace of creme brulee or meringue or marshmallow, thank god!) are a product of the fullness and robustness of the grapes, while a prominent limestone element makes it feel as if you're sipping the vineyard itself. Yahoo! Spending 10 months in French barrels (45% new, 55% once-used) ensures a firm structure and resolve.



Nickel & Nickel Suscol Ranch Merlot 2003

Napa Valley, California
100% Merlot
Excellent

It's time to get over *Sideways* and its big knock against merlot. (I need people to start drinking merlot again so I can have the pinot noir to myself.) (*Kidding.*) (But see Eric Asimov's posting for May 9 at thepour.blogs.nytimes.com for a meditation on the uses of merlot in Bordeaux and California and readers' responses.)

If you need evidence about the virtues of merlot not as a blending grape, try this 100 percent version by Nickel & Nickel made from Suscol Ranch grapes. This fine example from 2003 combines lush tannins, a velvety texture and very ripe, tremendously spicy cassis and black cherry fruit with all the grit and gumption, all the gravelly, basalt-like minerality and rigorous, briary austerity that you could want from a truly serious wine. It aged 16 months in French oak, 42 percent new, 58 percent once-used, and came out deep and fresh and pure. Try now through 2010 or '12.