

The New York Times

Dining & Wining

CELLAR PICKS

Wines of the Week

By LESLIE SBROCCO

Driving down Napa Valley's main road, Highway 29, this time of year is like walking into a bakery. The sweet, butter smell of fermenting grapes permeates the air, reminding me of blackberry pies fresh from the oven.

The 2002 crush in California is in full swing and looks to be another good vintage. The most popular premium varieties hailing from the Golden State continue to be chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Just as harvest trucks are overflowing with ripe grapes, store shelves are stocked to the brim with the "big four" making it easy to find delicious versions in all price ranges.

Merlot

1999 Nickel and Nickel, Merlot, "Suscol Ranch"

Napa Valley, California

\$70 -- Nickel and Nickel is a new winery (brought to you by the folks at Far Niente) focusing on single vineyard wines. Their goal is to express a sense of plushness, this concentrated merlot is balanced enough to drink now but will improve for years to come.