

Wine Talk by Robert Whitley

August, 2010

More Wines Like This Please

This week I recommend two wines that both thrilled me, and gave me pause. They are a Syrah and Merlot from **Nickel & Nickel, the Napa Valley winery that is the epitome in impeccable winemaking.**

Nickel & Nickel produces a number of vineyard-specific wines that illustrate the diversity and quality of terroir throughout Napa and Sonoma. The wines that got my attention were a Syrah from the Darien Vineyard in the Russian River Valley and a Merlot from the Suscol Ranch in the Jamieson Canyon district of the Napa Valley.

Merlot, as you may know, has been held in contempt ever since the movie "Sideways" cast a long shadow over the category with derisive comments from the star of the film. Syrah, rightly or wrongly, has never even had the cachet Merlot may have briefly enjoyed before it was so rudely dissed. Syrah has been touted as the next big thing in wine for nearly 20 years now, and we're still waiting.

I bring this up because neither grape gets the respect it deserves from the American wine enthusiast, despite the fact that Merlot-based wines from the Right Bank of Bordeaux and Syrah from the northern Rhone region of southern France are widely recognized as some of the finest in the world.

I believe I know why, and Nickel & Nickel provides the most important clue. **The Darien Syrah and the Suscol Merlot are as good as red wine gets in California. They are world-class wines that can hold their own, regardless of price or region of origin. If everyone in California made Syrah and Merlot at this level, there would be no lack of respect to discuss.**

But everyone doesn't.

Merlot suffered from its own popularity in the 1980s, when consumers fell in love with the wines of Duckhorn and Matanzas Creek. Vintners couldn't plant Merlot fast enough to catch the new wave of enthusiasm for varietal Merlot. Prior to Duckhorn, Matanzas and a few others, Merlot had been used primarily for blending.

"Most of the Napa Valley is too warm for Merlot," winemaker Cathy Corison [at Corison Winery] told me recently.

Indeed, the best Merlot from Napa is grown in the cooler areas of the valley, such as Jamieson Canyon or Carneros. Too much Merlot ended up being planted in areas where it makes wine that isn't very structured or interesting.

The same could be said of Syrah, although there is no doubt Syrah is more versatile than Merlot. Syrah suffers, I believe, from California's Baskin-Robbins approach to wine. Too many wineries believe they must produce a little bit of everything, and Syrah goes in whether it's suitable for the terroir or not. Then it's treated like a Cabernet Sauvignon and made in a ponderous style that is anything but inviting.

The success of both grapes at Nickel & Nickel sends a message that should be loud and clear. When grown in the right place and handled intelligently and meticulously in the winery, California Syrah and Merlot can be as good as it gets.

To the California wine industry, I would simply say, more wines like this please!

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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continued

TASTING NOTES

Nickel & Nickel 2007 Darien Vineyard Syrah, Russian River Valley — The problem with Syrah in California is Syrah in California. There are plenty of good Syrahs, few great Syrahs. So Nickel & Nickel's meaty, earthy Syrah from the Darien Vineyard in the Russian River Valley stands out from the crowd. It's spicy, rich and smoky, with supple tannins and layered red and black fruits. Though the alcohol is a bit high at 14.9 percent, the wine doesn't come off hot. It's well balanced and shows a sexy bit of minerality. If you're fond of the Syrahs of the northern Rhone, you will absolutely dig this classy, hedonistic Syrah from northern California. **Rating: 96.**

Nickel & Nickel 2007 Suscol Ranch Merlot, Napa Valley — There are a handful of California producers who consistently make exciting Merlot, and Nickel & Nickel is one of them. The secret is in the vineyard sources, for much of the Napa Valley is too warm for high class Merlot. Nickel & Nickel's Suscol Ranch Merlot is grown in the cool southern end of the Napa Valley, an area known as Jamieson Canyon. The Jamieson Canyon is often blanketed with fog, and temps can be 10 to 12 degrees cooler than vineyards up in the valley. This vintage of Suscol offers ripe blackberry and plum fruit, a rich and juicy mid-palate, and a sexy, spicy finish. It's a real crowd-pleaser that will make you forget everything you thought about California Merlot. **Rating: 95.**

Nickel & Nickel, 2008 Truchard Vineyard Chardonnay, Carneros — Truchard is one of the top growers in the Carneros (they also make wines under their own name) and Nickel & Nickel is one of the top wineries in the Napa Valley. That's a powerful combination, and year after year, they team up on a Chardonnay to die for. The 2008 is no exception. This vintage exhibits the intense lemon creme — lemon oil characteristic that all splendid Chardonnay possesses — along with subtle brown spice notes, juicy acidity and a trace of minerality behind the fruit. World-class Chardonnay by any standard you could imagine. **Rating: 93.**