

DINING IN, DINING OUT/STYLE DESK**WINE TALK; The 'Do It Yourself' Winery****By FRANK J. PRIAL (NYT) 1342 words**

Published: August 25, 1999

Route 29 is the Yellow Brick Road of California wine. Between the city of Napa and the town of Calistoga, about 20 miles to the north, 29 is a display of some of the world's most beautiful and prosperous wineries. From May to October, the road is packed with tourists come to gape at these temples of the good life, with their manicured vineyards and welcoming tasting rooms.

Hardly any of the tourists bother to glance at the Napa Wine Company here as they drive by. It's not hard to understand why. Compared with the sleek Opus One and Robert Mondavi wineries just to the north, the Napa Wine Company looks like a truck terminal. But in fact, many of the most sought-after wines -- the wonderful, little-known labels sold through exclusive mailing lists -- are made right here behind these unprepossessing walls.

Pahlmeyer Winery, the Lamborn Family Wine Company, Fife Vineyards, La Sirena, the Staglin Family Vineyard, Larkmead Vineyards, Mason Cellars, the Bryant Family Winery, Anthology, Azalea Springs, Buehler Vineyards, Broman and Stone Creek are just a few of the 50 or so wines made in this industrial-looking space. Larger wineries like Domaine Chandon, Benziger and Mumm Napa Valley also use the Napa Wine Company from time to time for part of their winemaking.

The Napa Wine Company is what is known in the trade as a custom-crush operation. "Custom crush" may sound like a hug from Jesse Ventura, but it means making wine in someone else's winery. For a small winemaker, the economic benefits of this are obvious. The capital investment in winemaking equipment -- crushers, fermenters, bottling lines and such -- is considerable: hundreds of thousands of dollars, whether the goal is to make 100 cases or 100,000.

For a fee, the Napa Wine Company can handle the entire winemaking process from the time the grapes arrive at the winery door until, two or three years later, the bottled, aged and labeled wine heads off to customers or wholesalers.

Charges are based on the number of tons of grapes crushed, the number of gallons of wines stored and the number of bottles filled and packaged. Special crushing methods will cost more.

"Prices can vary a lot," said Robert Lawson, the general manager, "but it usually averages out to about \$24 a case.

Jason Pahlmeyer of the Pahlmeyer Winery in St. Helena, Calif., is a customer and avid fan of the Napa Wine Company. "A lot of my colleagues are not eager to have it known that they use Napa Wine," he said. "They want to keep that image of the little stone winery with the ivy and bougainvillea all around, and let's face it, Napa Wine is not the prettiest place around."

But that does not mean that the company is not modern. "They've got a press over there that cost about \$1 million to install and \$60,000 a year to maintain," Mr. Pahlmeyer said, "and they have a state-of-the-art Italian bottling line I could never match -- nor would I want to. There's no way I could afford equipment like that for my little operation, and I have one of the bigger boutique wineries."

Mr. Pahlmeyer makes about 5,000 cases of wine a year, but his only long-term capital investments are his barrels and a gadget he inserts in the Napa Wine bottling line to position his labels properly.

Because of an unusually cool summer, the 1999 harvest is about three weeks late, but Napa Wine is busy scheduling the arrival of grapes for dozens of growers.

"All we ask is 24 hours' notice," said Mr. Lawson, the company's general manager. "Traffic can get heavy when the grapes start coming in, and the growers tend to get nervous. We tell them to be patient, that everyone will be taken care of."

Napa Wine has three winemakers, including Mr. Lawson, plus several dozen assistants, but each client must have its own consulting winemaker. The consulting winemakers, who have included such stars as Tony Soter, Heidi Barrett, Helen Turley

and Cathy Corison, may take over most of the winemaking tasks or merely direct them. They also return regularly to check on their wines as they mature in barrels.

For the most part, Napa Wine employees said, their relations with the consulting winemakers are good, but some, not to be named, can be arrogant and, they say, unreasonable. "Most of them hope one day to get their own wineries," one Napa Wine staff member said. "Some, we're glad when they do."

The Napa Wine staff, most of whom have been working in Napa Valley wineries all their lives, plot their winemaking schedule with military precision.

"We know what varieties will mature first and in what parts of the region," Mr. Lawson said. "Sauvignon blanc comes in first, then Napa chardonnay, then up-valley zinfandel. Pinot noir should be next, then Sonoma chardonnay, followed by Carneros chardonnay and Sonoma Coast pinot noir. Finally, we get cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc."

By Federal law, wine for commercial use must be made in a bonded -- that is, licensed -- winery, and each of the small wineries that use the place have their own bond number assigned by the Federal Government. At harvest time, many wineries can be making wine at the same time in a 24-hour-a-day operation.

When one of them is making wine in the plant, workers paint a yellow line on the floor, and that becomes that particular winery's bonded quarters for as long as the job takes, even if it's only for an hour or two. When the wine is moved into barrels for aging, the storage area then becomes the bonded premises.

"This is a very popular way to make wine," said Stephanie Grubbs, Napa Wine's sales and marketing director. "We usually have a waiting list of 10 to 15 prospective clients."

The Napa Wine Company is not alone in the custom-crush business. There are competitors in both the Napa Valley and in nearby Sonoma. In addition, many larger wineries rent out their services.

Napa Wine is owned by the Pelissa family, farmers and grape growers in the Napa Valley for four generations. The present winery was built in 1870 and had been owned by Heublein & Company, which used it to make chardonnay for its Inglenook brand. The Pelissas, who own some 650 acres of grapes in the Napa Valley, bought it in 1993 and turned it into a custom-crush business.

Earlier this year, catching on to a trend of their own making, the Pelissas began to market their own wines under the Napa Wine Company label, a 1997 sauvignon blanc, a 1997 pinot blanc and a 1996 cabernet sauvignon. With an eye on making top-quality wine, they are now competing with their own customers, all to the benefit of the wine drinker.

Tastings
Balancing Act

Mount Horrocks Clare Valley Late-Harvest Riesling 1998, Southeast Australia. About \$18.

NO one can resist a sweet dessert wine. I'm not talking about some sugary plonk fortified with 20 percent alcohol; it's easier to knock yourself out with a hammer. No, I'm referring to the viscous, golden late-harvest wines made entirely from overripe grapes.

The best are the sauvignon-semillon blends of Sauternes and the rieslings of Germany, Alsace and Austria. American versions often lack the acid needed to balance the sweetness.

This riesling from Australia is the nearest thing I've seen to a great German beerenauslese, a rare late-harvest wine that usually commands a high price. The winemaker, Stephanie Toole, achieves a balance of high sugar and intense acid that they'd be proud of in the Rheingau. A connoisseur's confection.

Photo: HAVE GRAPES, WILL CRUSH -- Andrew Hoxley, left, and Robert Lawson tend the wares at the Napa Wine Company. (Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times)(pg. F1); WINE IS WORK Grapes arriving at the Napa Wine Company in Oakville, Calif., where many boutique wineries make their wines, right. (Photographs by Terrence McCarthy)