

# Fall Field Seminar

Reg Oliver and Allen Price put together an extraordinary day in Oakville for the sold out harvest seminar. 40 members gathered in a light rain in Rutherford to carpool to the first stop, the Harry E. Jacob Research Facility and UC Davis Experimental Vineyard on Oakville Grade Road, Oakville. Allen and Reg ushered everyone into the Julio R. Gallo Conference Room where Allen introduced Mike Anderson, Viticulture Research Associate, Department of Viticulture and Enology, UC Davis.

Mike gave a swift historical overview of the site and summarized recent work of UC Davis on its two 20 acre vineyards, Old Federal and South Station. South Station is behind Far Niente and is currently the site for

Chardonnay trials as well Malbec, Semillon and Syrah. In 1991 on the Old Federal vineyard along Oakville Grade recent Cabernet trials, now concluded, took place with 22 rootstocks in order to test the full gamut of effects of rootstock on vine vigor, from debilitating to invigorating. Old Federal is also the site for a Zinfandel Heritage Vineyard. No trial block in either vineyard is larger than 2 acres. Remaining acreage is in Cabernet Sauvignon.

It is most uncommon to have research property on prime land. UC Davis is very fortunate to be able to conduct research in the heart of the Valley. Mike pointed out that they are doubly fortunate, since the facility and vineyards must support themselves, which they do through the sale of fruit from the vineyards and various donations.

Mike reviewed the role of American rootstocks in combatting that American pest, phylloxera, both in Europe and the US, where the rootstocks are American, *vitis rupestris*, and the fruit stocks European, *vinifera*. In addition to combatting phylloxera, US rootstocks have other advantages. They can influence vine vigor, minimize nematode damage and provide drought tolerance.

The Experimental Vineyards bearing blocks are planted 95% to Clone 8 Cabernet Sauvignon with the vines trained all the same way. The remaining 5% is planted to Merlot and Malbec clones. Because it takes four years of growth before you can get three years of bearing data, seven years is really too slow for timely clonal data and its spectrum of information, too narrow. More clonal material is being brought into the Valley all the time. Selections are not stable; they're subject to fashion, they get "hot". In a USDA-UC joint venture, the Foundation Plant Service, or FPS, plant material was evaluated for virus (all kinds) and virus-free plants true to variety were developed. FPS plants were made available to nurserymen and growers. However, there continues to be competition with illegal wood, like X-75 Cabernet Sauvignon (It's illegal to bring it in, but grand once it's here). Another popular clone, 337, brought leaf roll in from France, which spreads. Virus-free FPS plants are thought to be better and there was a successful campaign to replant vines infected with leaf roll. Mike watched vine foliage in the Valley change over from red in the fall to





*In the Heritage Vineyard at Oakville Station*

yellow. But now he sees it going back to red as illegal, “hot”, non-FPS budwood is brought in and cultivated.

Oakville Station works to preserve old vineyards, to archive them. It has grown and tested Syrah, Petite Sirah (which is probably Durif, a cross of Pelousin and Syrah from France) and Semillon from all over the state. Ampelographers, versed in growth habits of grape vines, the shape, texture and veining of their leaves, could spot 18 varieties in 20 minutes. The Station has helped develop Cab

clones from Niebaum Coppola--Clone 29, from Disney (See), Mondavi and Martha's Vineyard. Other varietals which have been collected and planted include a rare Sauvignon gris and the old-time Zin vineyard on redwood stakes (its drip hose is buried) which is called a Heritage Vineyard. This is a repository of old Zins from all over the state. Allen helped locate its ones from Napa County. Primitivo selections from Italy which are Zin, but from different clones, were also planted. The Heritage Vineyard is on certified virus-free St. George rootstock, which makes

for loose clusters and a low yield.

The Station conducts irrigation trials, dry farming with different vine and row spacing. In consideration of its soil variations, all trials are replicated five or six times, randomly throughout a block. A vineyard planted in 1992 is mature in 2002, with data collected from 1995 onward. The Old Federal Vineyard has been on a perpetual lease to UC Davis from the US Government since 1954. Mike envisions a future project on sustainable farming which could become a resource for legislation on organics.

At our second stop, Don Weaver, Director of Harlan Estate, greeted us saying he wasn't accustomed to welcoming visitors, much less a group (there's parking for only ten cars at the winery), but harvest has been over 10 days and now is when the true work begins! At the front door of the winery, sheltered by deep eaves and 500' above the Valley floor, we had a misty view of Harlan Estate, stretching from the Mays' Martha's Vineyard directly below to the first ridge of the Mayacamas above at 1,225'. The site was cleared in 1984, after a ten year negotiation with its former owner, and planted in 1985 and 1986. There are just 38 vine acres on the 240 acre estate.

Owner Bill Harlan is from Southern California. He went to UC Berkeley in 1957 when the Valley had, 'what', Don wondered, 'about 20 bonded wineries?' Bill started coming to the Valley on weekends. He was at the



*View from winery front door at Harlan Estate*

opening of Robert Mondavi Winery in 1966. He had formed the romantic notion that he'd have a winery of his own one day. And, as his business, Pacific Union Realty, got underway in the 70's and Bill began to travel, he started asking questions in the wine countries; as he got into asset management in the 80's, he realized wine was all about the land. Bill wanted to create a "First Growth" for California, emulating the wines of Bordeaux. He saw that French vineyards had relatively poor soils (this was clear to him in Burgundy); that the grand cru vineyard elevations of mid-Burgundy weren't so marked; and that Cab definitely doesn't like to have its feet wet. Today, at Harlan, the vineyard at 350' to 550' elevation

is considered the Tenderloin of the property because of site, geology. Bill thinks viticulturally this Tenderloin is the best in the Valley.

Vineyards and winery form a cleared crescent of land. The winery was completed in 2001. Six acres were originally on AxRI, half of which came out in 1998, half in 1999. Vineyards are planted 70% Cab, 20% Merlot, and 8% Cab Franc, with the percentage in Petite Verdot going up. The first release was in January 1996--a 12 year feat during which time Bill had formed Merryvale and hired Don to turn the former Sunnyside Winery around. They contracted fruit from Winery Lake, Spottswoode, John Arns. Bill studied

number of wines and price points. When Bob Levy left Rombauer to come on full-time as winemaker, Don went to the marketplace side of things (He says his 20 year association with Bill is rare in the business). Bill sold his Merryvale interest in 1995. His Harlan Estate vineyard had been under its wings early on, while Don, Bob and Bill were exploring Cabernets for Harlan.

Harlan makes 1,700 to 1,800 cases in a good year. It has exploited the best vineyard sites in terms of scale and intimacy and can potentially double production. Tonnage presently averages 1.8 to 2.5 tons an acre. The ambition is for wines of a place which bespeak the character of the land. Harlan practices a non-interventionist style of winemaking, 90% of which happens in the vineyard. However, there is vigorous selection throughout the winemaking process and only about half the wine gets into the bottle.

Fruit is picked by flavor. Multiple passes are made in the blocks using shallow 30 lb. bins. Picking is done before breakfast. Fruit goes to the destemmer; whole berries travel up a 12' "giraffe" conveyor belt to the top of stainless open-topped fermenting tanks which are filled 1/2 to 2/3 full. Berries can also be crushed with rollers as they fall into the tanks. A cold 7 day presoak precedes fermentation (Harlan feels maceration which is earlier is better). During an 8 to 10 day active fermentation (based on phenolic profile) they punch down, progressing from 3 times to just once a day.

After 30 to 60 days, wine goes into casks. Vineyard block pickings are kept separate, with 6 or 7 barrels constituting a large lot. There is co-fermentation of the lots when they are of like profiles. The fermentation room works just 3 months out of the year. A gravity fed aging cellar is directly below it, the casks in stacks of two. Harlan is meticulous in its methods, the winery scrupulously clean.

The small casks are all new French cooperage. Malolactic happens in the barrel. Harlan Estate Cabernet spends 25 months in the barrel. Wines culled after 10 months are destined for The Maiden. However, every grape aspires to get into the Harlan program. There are 700-800 cases of The Maiden made and about 2,000 of Harlan. It is all free run, with

no fining or filtering. The big difference in the two programs is in the quality of the tannins. The wine is really clean going into the barrel. Don thinks it is dense, concentrated, profound. Supple, with lots of pleasure. 30% to 40% of the wine is sold to the trade in 35 countries, the rest by mailing list. Since 1988, Michel Roland has consulted each year, now once a year on the vines and once on the wines.

The members then walked through to the tasting room with its welcoming fire in the fireplace. A wraparound deck frames the lofty room, large windows giving vaporous views that day of vineyards, oaks and nearby native shrubs. The Maiden 2002 and Harlan Estate 2002 had been decanted from the barrel (to be bottled in January) for us to taste. Don

thought the word 'harmonious' said the most about the property. Bill's concept for the winery was and is multigenerational, tied to the land. It takes 10 years and \$10 million into it before you realize what you do have, Don summarized. Harlan Estate is really about the next three hundred years.

Our third stop was at Nickel & Nickel, where we were welcomed by Jeff Weiss and a taste of Chardonnay John's Creek 2001 Napa Valley inside an old red barn built in 1770 for hay and horses in New Hampshire. A Vermont barn company had dismantled it and the winery had had it shipped out and rebuilt as wine lab, kitchen, conference and tasting room.

Gil Nickel, founding partner of Far Niente and Nickel & Nickel, was originally in the plant nursery business in Oklahoma. He later moved to San Francisco, to a house with wine equipment in the basement. Gil made a Chardonnay. It won a ribbon and he thought, 'How hard could this be?' In 1979 he and his partners bought Far Niente, to make the best Burgundian-style Chardonnay and the best Bordeaux-style Cabernet they could.

In 1995, Far Niente Merlot fruit from Soscol Ranch in Jameson Canyon was too spectacular to blend, although making a single vineyard wine was quite an innovation at the time. Gil and his partners formed Nickel & Nickel to make single varietals from single vineyards. Their first vintage was in 1997. In 1998 they





*"Cult Cabs" at Nickel & Nickel*

bought the 42 acre Sullinger ranch as a sister winery to Far Niente. Every one of its wines would be from a single vineyard. There would be no blending--as terroir as you could get.

Nickel & Nickel makes 8 Cabernets, 3 Chardonnays, 1 Zinfandel, 3 Merlots and 2 Syrahs. Case production is at 18,000, with a 35,000 case goal. Nickel & Nickel owns 30% of their vineyards, the rest is under contract. Darise Spinelli is winemaker. The original Sullinger Cabernet vines were kept, new drain tiles were installed and 30 acres replanted with budwood from the Sullinger vines. Various pruning styles have been instituted and the vines are smaller, more stressed.

The tank room for fermentation with a crew of four is in a new white dairy-style barn. Pump and electrical stations are plentiful and no hose is longer than 25'. For Gil, who died in 2003, winery work was all about safety

and ease. An adjacent low building of dressed stone sits atop 30,000 sq. ft. of underground barrel storage. On exhibit are soils from the Cabernet vineyards: Branding Iron, Rock Cairn, Stelling, Sullinger, and Tench in Oakville, Vogt on Howell Mountain, Dragonfly in St. Helena and Carpenter in Napa Valley. The site has lots of water, even hot springs (Oakville has a high water table). The cellar's concrete walls are one foot thick to control seepage (less than 1% of the wine is lost from evaporation). It is also climate controlled, with numerous work stations and no hose longer than 25'. Barrels are 100% French oak in two tiers and are used twice.

With an 18,000 case production, Nickel & Nickel uses a mobile bottling line. At full production, and with second fermentation barn, they will do the bottling themselves. Back in the tank room we tasted two wines: Sullinger Vineyard 2001 Cabernet from the home property, grafted from its original Cab, and 2001 Cabernet from Rock Cairn Vineyard, planted in 1984. The wines are aged in barrels with a medium toast, so you can taste the fruit. They are approachable now and in 10 to 15 years. The winery suggests laying them down for 5 to 7 years.

A catered lunch was served in the red barn. Nickel & Nickel poured Stelling 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon, made from 16 rows of vines leased from Far Niente. The wines the members tasted at lunch were:

- **Dalla Valle Vineyards** 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley
- **Harlan Estate Winery** 2000 Napa Valley
- **Heitz Cellar** Martha's Vineyard 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley
- **Joseph Phelps Vineyards** Backus 2001 Napa Valley Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon
- **Kelham Vineyards** Oakville Napa Valley 1999
- **Nickel & Nickel** Stelling Vineyard 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley
- **Opus One** 1999 Napa Valley Red Wine
- **PlumpJack Winery** 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley
- **Rudd Winery** 2001 Oakville Estate Napa Valley Red Wine
- **Screaming Eagle** 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley
- **Venge Family** Reserve 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley

All these wines were most generously donated by their vintners and provided a superb summation to a day devoted to "Cult Cabs" on and off the field in Oakville.