

# Harvest Seminar The Oak Knoll District

Saturday, October 14, 2006

Trefethen Vineyards  
1160 Oak Knoll Avenue, Napa  
60,000 case production

The fragrance of must filled Napa Valley the morning Wine Library members assembled outside the winery at Trefethen to embark on a visit to the fourteenth American Viticultural Area (AVA) in Napa Valley, Oak Knoll District (OKD). Jon Ruel, Trefethen Vineyards' Director of Viticulture, joined by David Whitehouse, its Vice President of Winery and Vineyard Operations, gave an overview of both OKD and Trefethen, as the last of its Dijon clones of Chardonnay were being picked and crushed.

OKD was approved in 2004. At the southern end of the Valley, it is cooled by a marine layer of air off San Pablo Bay. Oakville is warmer than OKD and Carneros, cooler. Fog along its rivers means cool mornings. OKD has no one soil type (unlike Rutherford with its Rutherford Dust). Trefethen estate vineyard soil is derived from Dry Creek allu-

vial fans--thrown rock and gravel. Aerial views reveal old riverbeds expressed in overarching vineyard canopies. Trefethen also has a mix of loam, clay and clay-loam soils, perfect for a variety of wine groups. Jon called OKD a "sweet spot" for growing wine grapes. Its Chardonnay is planted at the cool end of OKD, Pinot Noir at the warm end of that variety (although there are a few Rutherford Pinot vineyards), and Cabernet at just its southern [cool] limit in Napa Valley.

Presently, there are 2,500 planted acres in OKD, twenty bonded wineries, with over seventy-five other wineries that buy OKD fruit. More Merlot is planted than Chardonnay. Jon said Merlot is not as picky about microclimate and does fine in clay. Trefethen has 425 acres of estate vineyard. It grows Cabernet Sauvignon (25 acres of which is hillside), Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Merlot, two blocks of Riesling, Viognier (available only at the winery), Petite Verdot, Malbec, and Cabernet Franc and makes only estate wines. It sells about 35 percent of its fruit to other buyers. Most of the Pinot Noir is sold to Schramsberg, Mumm and Chandon (Chandon first crushed at Trefethen). Fifteen Chardonnay clones and ten rootstocks provide a diversity of aromatic profiles and ripening times. The Malbec ripens very early, one week ahead of the earliest Merlot. The Cabernet, planted on gravel, is at the cool end of its

growing limits and requires thoughtful viticulture, care in vineyard development and soil analyses. Gravelly soil's quick drain means quick mathematics. Stressful soils limit crop levels, as well as barley and rye cover crops, which can compete and slow down the vines' growth. Six tons an acre on hillside is all right for Cabernet and other Bordeaux varieties and four tons an acre on the flat. This July, foothills three miles away were five degrees warmer. Fog keeps OKD temperatures down on the Valley floor. The Chardonnay is at its warm end for planting. Its viticulture has to take in sunburn but, thankfully, there is a lot of fog. Trefethen thins heavily for easier ripening. Chardonnay is pruned vertical shoot position (VSP) for exposure and because of multiple heat spells. Summer is the time for pulling leaves for specific presentations. One or two leaves are left outside for diffuse dappled light on the cluster; more leaves are left inside. Each vine is visited eight times from pruning to picking. Trefethen maintains a full-time vineyard crew of 55.

In the old winery, upstairs among wines aging in barrels, Trefethen had Wine Library members taste its Chardonnay. The 1868 winery was designed by H. W. McIntyre (who also designed Far Niente and Greystone-CIA). [Trefethen was once part of Captain J. W. Osborne's extensive Oak Knoll farm.] In 1968, the Trefethens bought the winery and vineyard along

with prunes and walnuts. The 1970's replant was part of a renaissance in Napa Valley, replayed in the 1990's because of phylloxera. Aging of wines continues in the original winery building while fermentation takes place in a new building next door. Originally, wine fermented in open top redwood tanks on the bottom floor, after horses powered the crush on the top floor and presses on the middle. (Dave said the aging was probably done in San Francisco.)

Jon called the 2004 Trefethen estate grown OKD Napa Valley Chardonnay vibrant with great fruit flavor--tropical, citrus. Trefethen limits yeast participation in fermentation by allowing some yeast in oak, some in stainless, 100 percent ML in some, less in others--25 percent overall. Different toast levels contribute to flavor as well. No more than 25 percent new French oak, 80 percent barrel and 20

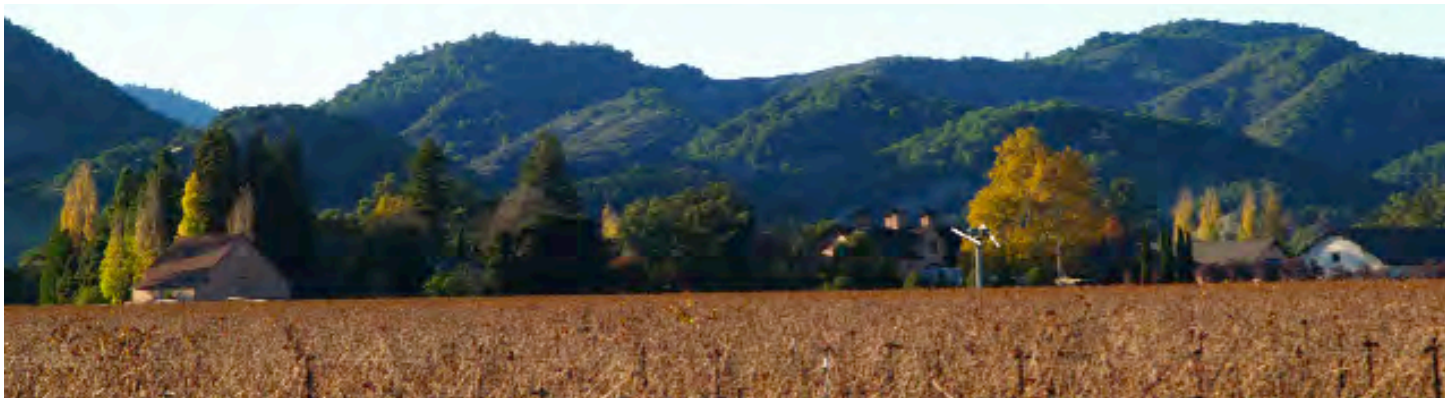
percent tank fermentation give the pineapple and grapefruit flavors. Dave called acid backbone the key to winemaking.

26 vineyard blocks means 26 different lots to ferment. Trefethen grows two Chardonnay types: UC Davis Olmo clones 4, 5, 8 and 14 keep acid better in warm environments (California is warmer than France); and the popular Dijon clones 76, 96 from Burgundy. Irrigation ten to fifteen years ago was patch by patch on the 425 acres. Now there are 121 valves, 20 soil moisture probes and daily pressure bomb testing to monitor 400,000 vines. Jon can compute the gallonage per vine. With afternoon breezes off San Francisco Bay, OKD can be even cooler than Carneros and Chardonnay harvest later because of a longer growing season. Trefethen irrigates Chardonnay, so the fruit can hang until flavors fully develop. Chardonnay blocks are picked

with sugar levels as low as 21° and as high as 24° to 25° Brix. By withholding Cab irrigation, smaller Cabernet berries give more skin, less pulp. And, with cool nights, the acid stays there. Water used in irrigation is reclaimed from winery operations as well as conserved winter rainfall. Jon finds vineyard sustainability increases as quality increases.

Monticello Vineyards,  
Corley Family Wines  
4242 Big Ranch Road, Napa  
15,000 case production

Three Corley brothers, Chris, Steve and Kevin, are in charge of Monticello Vineyards. Chris, is winemaker, Steve handles sales and marketing and Kevin (assisted by Angel Fina) is winegrower for Monticello Vineyards, established 26 years ago by their father, Jay, who was from Los



Angeles. Today, its vineyards include two on Big Ranch Road plus one each on State Lane, Yountville; Niebaum Lane, Rutherford; and Ehlers Lane, St. Helena.

Chris took the group to a block replanted in 1991 to Merlot and Cabernet Franc. With changes in viticulture, Chris said, you can ripen now what you couldn't when his father bought the vineyard--a former prune orchard. Today, there are several different vineyard practices at Monticello: there's no one right answer. In 1971, Chardonnay and some Pinot Noir were originally planted—Jay enjoyed drinking Burgundies (Grands-Eschezeaux). Clones were not as important then as they are now and the Corley Family also used AXR-I rootstock. In the 1980's, Merlot was its first Bordeaux varietal to be planted and Chris said this worked out really great. (Monticello had first bought Merlot fruit from Rutherford Hill as a Cabernet component.) Then, 12 or 13 years ago, Monticello planted one acre of Cabernet Franc--11 rows. There wasn't much quality information at the time, so Monticello worked with people in France to obtain a clone. Rootstock is 420-A (unpopular because of low vigor) and unilateral cordons yield less than three and a half tons an acre. Chris pointed out cane-pruned Pinot Noir on this rootstock and other Cabernet Franc, clones 312 and 332, on different rootstock as the group walked to the crush

pad. In 1999, Monticello introduced a proprietary blend of Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Chris said it sometimes adds Syrah to this blend. Syrah and Cabernet are from a vineyard on the other side of Big Ranch Road.

On the crush pad a table was set with a pitcher of juice and clusters of Merlot picked that morning. Chris said the clusters were a little higher in average fruit set—cool weather was a plus—with two to three lower °Brix and lower pH at 3.3, 3.4 that gives nice flavor and aromatic development. Not as high alcohol gives a healthier must. 12 acres of Merlot are planted at the winery and 8 across the road. Earlier picked Merlot was still on the skins, almost ready for the new bladder press. Chris said color development was



good—it was turned over two times a day in the tank. He was looking for tannin extraction, the mouth feel that comes in the second half of fermentation. Pumpovers for contact were now only five minutes a day. Alcohol as a solvent starts to pull tannins out of the seeds (fine in Cab, but not Merlot) and dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> can make tannins aggressive. Tasting the juice, Allen Price thought the 2006 Merlot similar to 2004. It, too, tasted of strawberries and cherries.

In the barrel aging room, Steve helped Chris pour 2003 Monticello Vineyards, Corley Family Napa Valley, estate grown Merlot and 2003 Corley Reserve Proprietary Red Blend. The 2003 Blend is 55 percent Cabernet Franc, 25 percent Merlot, 20 percent Cabernet Sauvignon (2004 has a splash of Syrah). Chris said the Proprietary Red really presents itself at the blending table. All components are made as carefully as possible. If you do the same thing two years in a row, laughed Steve, you probably got one of the years wrong. Merlot is aged in French oak, 25 percent new, for 20 to 21 months. Reserve Cabernet and Proprietary Red may be in as much as 40 percent new oak. Monticello produces Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot, a Jefferson Cuvée Cabernet, Corley Reserve Cabernet, Chardonnay and the Proprietary Red Blend, and small clonal bottlings, as well as a sparkling wine and Syrah rosé.

Between Monticello and the next stop the group took a muffin break at talbes under the sycamores with “Jake,” the winery’s black lab.

**Robert Biale Vineyards**  
**4038 Big Ranch Road, Napa**  
**8,000 case production**

Just down the road from Monticello is Robert Biale Vineyards where principal Bob Biale welcomed the group. The Biale family began farming vineyard in Napa Valley in 1937. However, they didn’t begin to make wine commercially until 1991.

Bob first got into the business in his teens, selling eggs, vegetables, nuts and black



chickens like his father, Aldo. (Back in the 1940’s and 50’s, a common order might be for three dozen eggs and a “black chicken”—local slang for a jug of “Early Burgundy”). Bob went on to Beringer and then founded Biale with his father and Dave Pramuk, with Al Perry, winemaker. In 2004, the new winery was finished, a whisker late for harvest.

This day the group arrived in time to see blue plastic bins of Zinfandel fruit that had just come in from Sage Canyon Road at 26-27° Brix, as well as Zinfandel ready for the bladder press. Kevin Powell, from Wales, assisting with harvests since 1999, next took the group on a catwalk to observe open top fermentations of Merlot and Zinfandel. Stan Boyd was also overseeing the custom crushing of his Merlot. His 15 acre vineyard is adjacent to Biale and Stan makes 1,000 cases of Boyd Family Vineyard Merlot there. He had started at 7:00 am with fruit at 27° Brix.

On the crush pad, the group watched as bins of Stan’s Merlot were fork lifted into a hopper, on to the sorting table, and into a destemmer. Bins of berries were then fork lifted up and emptied into a fermenter. Boyd also grows Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Syrah and a touch of Cabernet and sells to Sequoia Grove, Karl Lawrence, Berassa and Suhr Luchtel. Zinfandel in the bladder press had come from the original Biale Vineyard in downtown Napa on El

Centro Avenue--Aldo’s Vineyard. Kevin said its pomace would be returned and spread on the 69 year-old vineyard.

In the tasting room, Bob said most of what Biale makes (90 percent), and has always made, is Zinfandel. However, since 2001, besides single vineyard Zinfandels, Bob said as he poured 2003 Black Chicken Zinfandel, they began to blend. Now they make, Zappa, a blend of Zinfandel, Syrah and Petite Sirah. Bob says Al Perry, winemaker, has a soft touch, a delicate feel. Biale has also introduced a new brand, Hill Climber made from four different vineyards. Bob poured 2003 Hill Climber Linda Vista Vineyard Syrah, noting its bright acids and naturally intense fruit and calling it “very OKD, ” and 2003 Hill Climber Rolly Akers Syrah. The Syrahs are available only at restaurants and the winery. Bob also poured 2002 Nonna’s Sangiovese, made from an acre of Sangiovese Aldo planted in 1992 in his Aldo’s Vineyard and named in honor of Bob’s grandmother. 2002 was a warm vintage, and Bob described this Sangiovese as soft, with lots of fruit, yet retaining its typical acidity. Biale grows 30 percent of its fruit and contracts the other 70 percent. It also makes Petite Sirah (called Royal Punishers, an acrostic of Peloursin + Syrah) and Barbera, all from mostly old vineyard. Bob said, at heart, he’s an historic preservationist.

Oak Knoll Ranch  
and Lamoreaux Estate  
2200 West Oak Knoll, Napa

Our last stop was at eponymous Oak Knoll Ranch. Wine Library members parked in its “Rose Bowl” and walked up to the house where Morgan Morgan, property manager for the ranch, introduced us to the history of the estate and its winegrowing. It was originally laid out and farmed by Captain Joseph W. Osborne. The captain bought 1,000 acres in 1851, and with it won Best Farm in California in 1856. An avid viticulturalist and horticulturalist, Captain Osborne planted six thousand vines and established orchards of fig and citrus, as well as a herd of cattle. Author Charles Sullivan credits the captain with a farm of 1,800 acres and, with Captain Frederick W. Macondray, the introduction of Zinfandel to Napa and Sonoma County. Worse luck,

a “disgruntled employee” murdered the captain in 1863. [His Zin, however, lives on at Louis M. Martini’s Monte Rosso Vineyard in Sonoma.]

In 1949, Oak Knoll was bought by the Lamoreaux family of Napa. Much of Osborne’s orchards, vineyards and pastures are still in place on the 750 acres Phillip Lamoreaux farms as Oak Knoll Ranch and Lamoreaux Estate. A portion of Oak Knoll had been sold much earlier--Eschol Vineyard (the Trefethen Winery today). In the 1940’s, the Victorian farmhouse of the captain’s day was transformed into a replica of “Oak Alley” in Louisiana, and called “Rosetown” by a silent film actress. Polo ponies and thoroughbred horses that had filled its stables in the 1920’s and 1930’s are long-gone and Phillip’s father gave up running cattle in the 1970’s. Mature oaks dominate the pastures, and rose bushes enliven its lawns.



Today, on fifty acres, Cabernet Sauvignon is grown for Caymus, David Ramey and Sequoia Grove; Chardonnay for Steltzner; Sauvignon Blanc is being planted for Duckhorn (as Pinot Noir and Chardonnay once were for Newton). Morgan said an additional fifty acres could be planted.

Box lunches beneath magnolias, oaks and hawthorn were accompanied by nearly two dozen wines. In addition to those from wineries visited earlier were:

Boyd 2002 Big Ranch Vineyard Merlot

Boyd 2002 Big Ranch Vineyard Syrah

Meadowbrook Farm 2000

Birtcher Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon

Mendelson 2002 Muscat Canelli

Napa Valley Dessert Wine

Nord Estate Wines 2004

Page Nord Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon

O’Brien Cellars 2003

Napa Valley Seduction

Sequoia Grove 2004

Lamoreaux Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon

Steltzner Vineyards 2004

Oak Knoll District Chardonnay

Surh Luchtel 2004

Oak Knoll District Syrah

Surely Mendelson Muscat Canelli was an apt conclusion to our tour of this sweet spot of an appellation in Napa Valley.