



A Nichols Worth of Wine

In the Vineyard

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Big, bigger, biggest! Super-sized! Big Gulps! Does size matter? Does quantity trump quality? The world and America in particular, seems increasingly obsessed with taking what they have and making it larger. The wine industry is no exception to this phenomenon as witnessed this summer when Napa wine trailblazer, Warren Winiarski, sold his family-owned Stags Leap Wine Cellars. Not since international behemoth Constellation Brands gobbled up venerable Robert Mondavi four years ago, has the industry been so stunned.

It just wasn't the sale of another well-known California winery that was shocking; big wine companies –and sometimes companies that have nothing to do with wine – have been swallowing smaller and not so small wineries for some time now. What really caught industry watchers by surprise was the \$185 million price tag; the buyers (Italy's iconic vintner, Piero Antinori in partnership with Washington state wine giant, Chateau Ste. Michelle); and perhaps more importantly, Stags Leap status in the wine community. It is generally credited with putting California (and American) wineries on the world map when one of Winiarski's cabernets topped France's best Bordeaux's in the now infamous 1976 "*Judgment of Paris*" wine tasting.

It is absolutely dizzying trying to keep up with the number of wineries that have changed hands in the last few years in this "bigger is better" corporate environment. With some of these sales, the ink is barely dried on the contract when wineries are flipped yet again. Winiarski's next door neighbor, Stag's Leap Winery (no relation whatsoever) sold to the larger Beringer, which was then devoured by Australia beer giant, Foster's Brewing Company. At last count, Foster's owned more than fifty wineries around the world including, Chateau St. Jean, Meridian, Penfolds and France's Lanson Champagne.

Constellation, Mondavi's parent, now the world's largest wine marketer recently reported more than \$700 million in second quarter wine sales! Yes, that was "millions" and yes, in a single quarter. Their current portfolio of more than a hundred wineries includes America's Simi, Estancia and Franciscan, Italy's Ruffino, and New Zealand's Nobilo brands who in turn own the award-winning Drylands and Kim Crawford wineries.

Is your head spinning yet? Well, hold on because none of the above mentioned mega-merging monoliths actually own the biggest (best?) selling wine in the world – Franzia. And Franzia? Yep, they're owned by someone else too! San Francisco based, The Wine Group, a privately-owned company that was once owned by Coca-Cola, and has world wide winery holdings, has the distinction of owning the colossal volume Franzia. In 2005, Franzia reported selling almost 90 million glasses of wine in US restaurants.

Funny, I don't know how I ever missed tasting the stuff. It might have something to do with the fact that it is sold in boxes, a concept I have yet to embrace. The Wine Group also owns Corbett Canyon, Italy's Casarsa, and (remember this one?), Mogen David.

Consolidation is an inevitable reality that has taken on a life of its own in America and abroad. This trend has not been limited to only the big players in the industry either. Buying sprees had generally been limited to the larger vineyards and winery operations. But in this real-life version of Pac-man eating the little creatures, wine conglomerates, in an effort to magnify their image, are now setting their sights on "boutique" producers that make five to ten thousand cases a vintage. Many small family grape growers and vintners are gladly taking the money and running. And who can blame them? Profitability is very fleeting in the wine business at that production level.

So the questions that beg to be asked are these: "Is bigger really better?", and "What does consolidation mean for the wine consumer?" I guess it depends on which side of the vineyard you're sitting on. In the best of corporate worlds, stockholders often embrace and benefit from the economies of scale that can accompany acquisition growth in a company. Wineries fortunate enough to catch the wave of a strong real estate market are commanding incredible prices for their vineyards – upwards of \$300, 000 an acre for prime Napa Valley land. As to the consumer, well that's where it gets sticky. There are those who believe bigger companies have the deep pockets to buy the talent and land to provide consumers with quality wines. Then there's the rather large and vocal contingent who worry that the decision-makers in the bottom-line driven boardrooms will homogenize wine into insipid, cheap, alcohol-flavored beverages and limit the choice of wines we buy.

The truth is that, to date, overall wine quality in the past decade has improved dramatically. Savvy shoppers select from a sea of wines offering tremendous value. There are more than 40,000 wines on the market today; that certainly doesn't equate to a lack of choice. If anything there are, in my opinion, too many wines to choose from for the average wine buyer. It's too confusing. Thankfully, there are still producers filling the market demand for handcrafted wines of great finesse, balance and varietal character. As for the boardroom bullies with their insatiable appetite for brand domination? As long as they exercise a very distant oversight and allow the growers and winemakers to make the day-to-day "non-business" decisions, fine by me. Bring on more of that great selection of high-quality, reasonably priced wines!

Did you know...

The syrah grape, at the time known as *scyras*, was first brought to France's Rhone region from Iran by the Crusaders.

Around Town

In a town where much of the sophisticated food and wine scene can happen behind the gates of private clubs, shutting out a lot of locals and visitors, it's refreshing to meet someone in the public sector who is knowledgeable, experienced and truly committed to satisfying their customers. That's not to say that there aren't a lot of good and even great chefs, restaurant managers and servers in Naples, there are. As for wine people, those who earn a living from the grape, there are only a handful of wine professionals here in town that seem as though they truly know and care about wine. I recently had the opportunity to sit and talk at length with one of the best and most passionate.

Jeff Mitchell, Wine and Spirits Manager for the D'Amico restaurants, which includes Campiello's and Café Lurcat, is a fairly young guy, but Jeff's obvious enthusiasm for wine made me think he has been around wine for a long, long time. An accomplished chef, Jeff graduated from both the Culinary Institute of America and the University of Wisconsin Resort and Hospitality program. His introduction to the restaurant world, however, came much earlier in his native Detroit where his grandparents owned and operated an Italian restaurant. These days though, most of Jeff's time behind a stove is at home where he prepares meals-to-go for his busy school teacher wife.

Jeff's transition to the wine end of the business began in the strangest of ways - the result of a tick bite. While enjoying another of his interests, running, Jeff was bitten by a deer tick as he jogged through the woods nearby CIA's, Hyde Park, New York campus. That led to a lengthy bout with Lyme disease. Unfortunately, Jeff was only days away from completing the rigorous CIA wine education course and had to retake the course. Years later, Naples Campiello's and Café Lurcat restaurant customers benefit from that fateful incident.

In just a few years, the wine programs at both eateries have improved considerably under Jeff's stewardship, both in the number of selections and the quality, depth and diversity of the wine lists. Campiello's, with its brilliantly authentic Italian cuisine, boasts a list of almost 300 labels, 65% of which are reds. Incredibly, fifty percent of Campiello's wine sales, with a decided focus on small, quality-driven producers from Italy, come from a wine-by-the-glass program of about twenty well chosen selections. Here again, the pairings of the wines to the menu, are a natural extension of Jeff's culinary background and his appreciation of wine as food.

Understandably, Jeff would not disclose annual wine sales, but Campiello's can do up to 650 dinners in a single night in season. That's a lot of wine! The purchasing power associated with that kind of volume gives Campiello's access to highly allocated, highly rated wines, like the 100-point Casanova di Neri Brunello. If your tastes and pocket run to these impossible to obtain cult wines, Jeff has a cellar of "collector" wines that do not appear on the list, but are available on request. For the rest of us, wines like a Pinot Bianco from Alto Adige producer, Alois Lageder, and a number of value-priced Super Tuscan reds are an excellent choice to pair with my favorite Campiello's menu items.

The “*Spicy Fried Calamari*”, “*Wood Oven Margherita Pizza*”, and the “*Penne with Pulled Chicken, Gorgonzola and Spinach*” are all incredible dishes!

Over at *Café Lurcat* on Fifth Avenue, the list, which is approaching a whopping five hundred labels, demonstrates Jeff’s ability to stretch far beyond his beloved Italy. Here the “*New American*” menu calls for a wide-range of wines and again clearly reflects his preference for producers who care more about quality than high production. Highlights of the Lurcat wine list include a number of bottles in the under \$30 range and there are two dozen wines by the glass including, a chardonnay from Talbot and the “*Four Graces*” pinot noir from Oregon’s, Willamette Valley. In addition to the “taster” size pour of 2.5 ounces and the standard 6 ounce by-the-glass, Jeff offers the wines in a 10 ounce pour, a “goldilocks” size, just right when one glass is never quite enough!

The well-rounded *Café Lurcat* menu covers interesting adaptations of classic American dishes like the Crab Cakes and Pot Roast and Jeff has filled the list with labels such as Groth sauvignon blanc and local vintner, Clarke Swanson’s “*Alexis*” cabernet that are (respectively) perfect accompaniments to these timeless versions of home cooked meals. If you want to go a little more eclectic or if it’s a special occasion, Lurcat’s culinary team prepares a *Sautéed Grouper with Truffle Butter* or the *Foie Gras with Prosciutto and Roasted Pears*! To compliment meals of this caliber, the wine list offers a vertical of Bordeaux’s Leoville Las Cases, including the legendary 1982 vintage. There are multiple vintages of arguably the world’s most renowned producer, Gaja, and tremendous depth in the much sought after single-vineyard California cabernets.

Pricing on the wines at both restaurants is reasonable given that many just are not available outside of private collections. The pour is fair, and the wine service is professional and knowledgeable thanks to a very innovative and aggressive education program. All service staff is brought in weekly to taste up to four wines. Not surprisingly, Jeff’s cooking background and his understanding of the role ingredients in a dish adds to the server’s education in pairing wines with the restaurant’s menu items. To help the staff develop the sense of association with the wines they are serving, Jeff occasionally will introduce a range of music genres that might reflect a style of wine. Think *Bolero* and syrah – big and bold, or a racy jazz number and sauvignon blanc. This is certainly a unique approach, but wine, if nothing else is a highly sensory experience and you have to applaud Jeff for employing every possible tool to educate his staff.

Sometime just after the first of the year, Jeff will introduce a custom blended wine-by-the-glass program he co-developed with leading California winemaker, Jim Clendenen, of Au Bon Climat vineyard in Santa Barbara. Available in white and red, each glass of wine sold will benefit the Naples Community Hospital’s, *Garden of Hope and Courage*. The beautiful 2 acre garden is located on the NCH hospital property and was inspired by Jan Enfield, the wife of a lifelong friend of Campiello’s owner Richard D’Amico. Jan passed away from breast cancer in 1994. Jeff is also working on placing specially labeled bottles of the *Jan’s White* and *Jan’s Red* wines with local wine merchant, Peter Rizzo of Old Naples Wholesale Wines shortly after release.

So, if one of the factors you consider when dining in Naples is a stellar wine program, then Campiello's and Café Lurcat is a must reservation. And if you ever happen to be in Minneapolis, Jeff also oversees the wine program for the five full-service D'Amico's restaurants there. Jeff's a busy guy to be sure, but if you have a special wine request when dining at the restaurants, ask for Jeff. I'm sure he'd love to talk wine, especially if you mention his favorite grape - Barbaresco.