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Big Grapes in the Big Apple

Tony Poer Jan 3, 2019

TRY 1 MONTH FOR 99¢



Eric Penneys, northeast regional manager for Far Niente and Larry Maguire, Far Niente Winery president emeritus, stand in front of portraits of Maria Callas, George Gershwin and Arturo Toscanini while talking to guests at the Oakville Winegrowers tasting at Carnegie Hall.

Tony Poer photo

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For the Napa contingent in New York, the theme could have been out of the frying pan and into the freezer.

On a frigid Thursday a week before Thanksgiving, representatives from nearly two dozen Napa Valley wineries gathered in Midtown Manhattan. They had traveled east for “Taste of Oakville: Live at Carnegie Hall,” the Oakville Growers’ biennial master class and trade tasting at the historic concert venue.

For the Napa contingent in New York, the theme could have been out of the frying pan and into the freezer. Leaving behind the Butte County fire’s hazy, orange-brown skies, they ran head-first into a late fall nor’easter that dumped six inches of snow on the Big Apple in as many hours. But the storm didn’t stop them. Nor did it deter scores of New York sommeliers and retailers from attending the sold-out event.

Ahead of the afternoon and evening tastings, the Growers hosted a panel discussion for a smaller group of 45 guests that focused on the generational shift taking place in the Oakville AVA. It was, indeed, a master class, with a Master of Wine, Constellation Brands’ Peter Marks, on hand to moderate three masters of Oakville Cabernet. They were joined by a pair of younger professionals who appear well on their way to that status. The conversation was a 100-minute deep dive into the past, present, and future of Oakville.

“I wanted to stay on the East Coast. Now, with this weather, I’m wondering why,” replied one of these latter panelists, Lindsay Hoopes, owner and general manager of Hoopes Vineyard, to the first question Marks asked of the entire panel: how did you end up in Oakville?

With her back to the 10th floor windows of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Room, the audience laughed as Hoopes motioned at the steely gray Manhattan sky behind her. She confessed to being glad that after attending East Coast boarding school and Georgetown University, she eventually resettled in the Napa Valley to take over her family's winery. A stop along the way working at E&J Gallo helped her to recognize the value of her father Spencer's grape growing.

"I learned a lot about the marketing side and business development," she said. "But I wanted to tell a story about our terroir that I had grown up on, and I understood the difference between just building a brand and telling a story about our family. So Oakville became much more important to me, and I wanted to go back."

It was sentiment shared by Far Niente Winery president emeritus Larry Maguire, one of the three senior panelists and a 35-year veteran of the Oakville winery.

"My family brought me to Napa kicking and screaming as a 14-year-old," he recalled. "I left southern California to start my sophomore year in high school in Napa Valley. I thought it was the worst thing that could possibly happen to me, and it turns out it was the best thing."

Educated by the Christian Brothers in both high school and college, Maguire would go onto a wine sales career that began in 1977 and led to a Far Niente partnership with Gil Nickel and Dirk Hampson in the early '80s.

Seated between Maguire and Hoopes was Geneviève Janssens, chief winemaker at Robert Mondavi Winery, who grew up in a French wine-making family and first visited Napa Valley as a wine-curious tourist, also in 1977. With far fewer wineries in the Valley back then, Robert Mondavi was an easy choice. A year later, she found herself working in the Mondavi lab as an enologist.

“I was very much under the philosophy of Mr. Mondavi, which was the holistic approach of winemaking,” Janssens told the audience. “He made wine not to collect but to be drunk and to be enjoyed with friends, family, and a good meal. So I thought, ‘That’s a good life. I think I want to have that life.’ And that’s how I arrived in Oakville.”

Napa Valley’s most famous vintner also had a huge influence on Groth Vineyards winemaker emeritus, Michael Weis, who rounded out the panel’s trio of industry veterans. Weis had been a pre-med major in college, but, he noted, “every so often you have a fork in the road. You go this way, or you can go that way. I decided to not get into medicine because I found out about wine.”

Working towards a master’s degree in microbiology at UC Berkeley in the 1970s, he and his friends would take breaks on weekends and visit Napa Valley. “Back in the early ‘70s, you each put a buck in the gas tank, you all get into the VW Bug and go up to Napa and taste wine for free. That’s how I kind of started getting into wine. And interestingly enough, one of the first wineries that I was really taken aback by was Robert Mondavi.”

In 1973, Weis landed an experimental enology position at Mondavi, “the plum job of that particular vintage,” as he described it. His Oakville fate was sealed.

The fifth and final member of the panel was Weis’s colleague and director of wine grapegrowing at Groth, Cameron Parry. Like Lindsay Hoopes, Parry, 43, was selected to represent the newer generation of Oakville winemaking.

While the elder Groth winemaker credited serendipity for bringing him to Oakville, Parry, who studied microbiology at New Mexico State, explained that it was a combination of good timing and scientific curiosity in his case. With his and Weis’s shared science backgrounds and intersection of careers at Groth, the audience might have viewed their experiences as two sides of the same coin.

The Albuquerque native worked a variety of cellar jobs after college, which led him to UC Davis and a master’s degree in food science and enology. After a brief stint at a Chilean winery, Parry, in his own words, “then had the good fortune to come back up and get a position with Chateau Montelena,” where he eventually became the winemaker. He spent a decade at the Calistoga winery. Oakville was his next stop.

“Michael decided to retire,” Parry said, before correcting himself. “Well, not retire, but slow down a little, I guess. And the Groth family came up with a new position, director of wine grapegrowing, which was a relatively unique opportunity. There

aren't too many people in the Napa Valley that have this type of a position, watching over both farming and the wine production. And the intent there, the idea, was to have one person looking at quality from dirt to bottle.”

That concept, the intertwining of grape farming and winemaking, was a theme of the panel's discussion. But whatever the enthusiasm for making wine in Oakville — and, as the masterclass demonstrated, there's quite a bit of it — the wines have to reach wholesalers and their customers. Hence the trade show that followed the seminar, along with the consumer tasting. Tickets sold for that evening portion carried a New York price tag and benefited Carnegie Hall's artistic and education programs.

Underscoring the artistic side of Oakville Cabernet, the tastings were held one floor down in the Joan and Sanford I. Weill Terrace Room. Large, black-and-white portraits, including Julie Andrews, Ella Fitzgerald, and Leonard Bernstein, adorn the walls of the multi-use space.

Soprano Maria Callas stared enigmatically over the heads of Larry Maguire and Far Niente's northeast regional manager, Eric Penneys, while George Gershwin stayed focused on his piano keys. Meanwhile, Paradigm Winery owner Ren Harris shared his space with the smiling and very famous mug of Tony Bennett. It was all fitting: wine is art, as well as science, with a little pizzazz mixed in.

Since RSVPs were thinned out by the storm blowing down Seventh Avenue, there was more

room for the 150 or so members of the trade to mingle alongside the vintners' tables. The crowd was mostly restaurateurs and retailers from New York, unfazed by the severe weather. Some intrepid buyers even ventured over from New Jersey.

In addition to the vintners from the panel, attendees had the opportunity to taste and chat with winemakers like Tom Garrett of Detert Family Winery and Andy Erickson of Favia Wines.

Miner Family Winery's head winemaker, Stacy Vogel, also made the trip to meet buyers and convey the Oakville message. The Napa resident was a longtime assistant to former winemaker (now GM) Gary Brookman before taking over for him in 2013. This was her second New York visit in 18 months.

"There are thousands of restaurants in New York, but it also feels like a very crowded market," the winemaker observed, switching gears to show off her sales prowess. "[It] requires a lot of individual attention. I think the potential is good, but every single restaurant is a hand-sell, and you have to get to know the buyer at every place. I think you really have to kind of be committed to it."

The Oakville contingent wasn't made up of just Californians. Far Niente's Penneys and Miner Family's New York-based broker, Tony Didio, are ambassadors for Oakville up and down the East Coast and two of the better-connected salespeople who participated. They comfortably worked the Terrace Room like Napa Valley hospitality directors.

Oakville Winegrowers' Executive Director Joyce Stavert has organized four of these biennial events going back to 2012. She later pointed out that “the ability to execute a presentation like this really shows the camaraderie and dedication of this talented collection of vintners, and their passion for the Oakville AVA.”

Stavert's efforts, especially in creating the masterclass program, didn't go unnoticed. “The planning leading up to the event was very detailed and organized, which I appreciated,” Penneys said. He was particularly happy to see his emeritus boss on the panel that morning.

“Larry has been working for Far Niente for close to 40 years, and he knows Napa Valley as well as anybody. And I think the other participants, with their history in the Valley and specifically Oakville, they bring a lot to the table. There was plenty of information shared that I'm sure most people didn't really know about Oakville.”

What is widely acknowledged about this narrow strip of Napa Valley — on both U.S. coasts and most everywhere in between — is that it produces some of the world's best Cabernet Sauvignons. Near the end of the master class, Geneviève Janssens commented on the structure and ageability of Mondavi's and her colleagues' Cabernets from the much-heralded 2013 vintage.

“The beauty of Oakville is the fruit,” she said. “I see across the board, there is a gentleness. There is a finesse and elegance and with very dark fruit. Cassis and a little bit of a hint of herbs, which is

very important for all of us, and [wine] evolving in the bottle in an incredibly gracious way. That's really what I think is important about Oakville."

Back home in Napa in early December, Lindsay Hoopes took a few minutes to reflect on the Winegrowers' trip to Manhattan. That nor'easter was still a shiver-inducing memory, but an excellent 2018 harvest was in the books, the Butte County fire was contained, and wine country skies were blue again.

The 37-year-old talked about Cameron Parry's and her participation in the masterclass, lined up next to three of the California wine industry's most accomplished veterans.

She said that Janssens, Weis, and Maguire had painted a clear picture of how Oakville and Napa Valley looked 40 years ago, "and then Cameron and I were able to talk about what we think our generation has contributed to improving the farming and the understanding of how to get our wines from, let's say, the quality levels of the '80s and '90s and into the 2000s and beyond."

"I think the idea is that Napa has always moved forward because we've always been trying to catch up with everybody else," Hoopes added. "We just need to keep that momentum towards being spectacular, because we are more spectacular the more we know."

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