



## QUINTESSA

# Jim's Postcard from Napa Valley

Napa Valley completed its first harvest of 2003 over the weekend.

It's a little known fact that there are really TWO harvests a year in this fabled, fertile valley.

The second, in the Fall, is perhaps greater in size, but not grander in scope.

Wine lovers and passionate wine collectors, however, eagerly anticipate the earlier of the valley's two annual harvests.

On Saturday, the Napa Valley Wine Auction harvested \$6.5 million from 1800 wine aficionados.

### A Bar Mitzvah on steroids

This year the auction attracted 1800 people from across the world who paid \$2500 for a pair of tickets and then bid madly to take home anything even remotely vinous – etched bottles, wine-themed paintings and barrels of wine the won't be bottled for a few years.

The four-day event is like a Bar Mitzvah on steroids. It is a non-stop eat-and-drink fest, greater in scope than anything you might imagine.

### Day Four Festivities

Twenty different wineries opened their doors on Sunday, June 8th. Inviting the 1800 Napa Valley Wine Auction guests for more wine and more noshes, just in case someone hasn't gotten his fill of the good life in the last 72 hours.

I opted to see the new Quintessa winery in Rutherford, where owners Agustin and Valeria Huneeus and winemaker Sarah Gott (ex Joseph Phelps) are turning out head-turning wine. The minimalist winery, built into the side of a hill, has the curve and linear look of something that might have to do with air travel or bowling. Walking into the mostly stone, high-ceiling foyer one feels that he has entered, by accident, a Four Season hotel.

Downstairs, on the fermenter level, there are elements of design that remind one of a new-age airport terminal; a cavernous entrance to the *chai* resembles the prayer room of some mystic cult with a very erect stone water fountain at the center.

Walking with Grady Sibert, the very pleasant and very knowledgeable general manager of the property, we learn that of the property's 285 acres, some 145 are planted producing fruit. Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot are planted.

They're even experimenting with "biodynamics" and have planted a 45-acre parcel using this ancient, mostly French-inspired, method of farming. "We're conducting a five-year experiment" says Grady. "We are trying it in a block where we do not typically harvest fruit that qualifies for Quintessa; it will be interesting to see whether lunar-based "homeopathy for plants" really works. We have a lot to learn."

Well, not that much. Back inside, we conducted a tasting of the 95, 98 & 99 vintages and they are spectacular.

It is evident that Quintessa belongs in that same breath of "First Growth Napa Valley Reds" that would include Phelps' Insignia, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars' Cask 123 and Shafers Hillside Select. The "Big Juices."

Of the 1999 Quintessa, one can report: The nose leaps from the glass with an almost perceptible velvet texture. Even on the strength of a sniff, you know this is going to be a consummate wine. On the palate, the wine has focus, charm, finesse and class. It skirts past the finish line with an easy 94 or 95 points, and it hasn't even broken a sweat. This is one gem you don't want to swirl and spit. You are compelled to swallow.

