

## Napa Valley *Register*

by L. Pierce Carson, August 26, 2011

Ray Signorello Jr. has never backed away from a challenge. When his late father decided to retire in California after a successful mining career in British Columbia, Signorello welcomed the change of scenery. When his father planted grapes and then decided to make some wine in the mid-1980s, Ray Jr. rolled up his sleeves. While he was schooled for a career in investment banking, the San Francisco transplant welcomed an offered opportunity to work in commercial real estate. And when his dad's "by the seat of the pants" winemaking venture turned serious, Ray Jr. was on hand to help build and run the Signorello Estate winery.

Now, coming up on three decades of grapegrowing and winemaking, the second generation vintner is bent on making significant changes in both vineyard and cellar that will produce even better wines. Signorello has invited respected viticulturist/winemaker Luc Morlet to help improve vine and wine quality, even if it means seriously cutting back on the production of Signorello wines in the process. The 48-year-old vintner can afford this marked retooling because he has other wine brands - Fuse and Edge - that can make good use of the fruit and, for starters, just happen to be brands offering a lot of bang for the buck.

For example, production of the 2007 Signorello Estate cabernet sauvignon was 2,500 cases. In an effort to market only the best wine from the family estate, production of this same wine was cut to 350 cases in both 2008 and 2009 vintages. Signorello loves "European style wines rather than the big fruit bombs," he told a group of writers and consumers at a recent gathering at the Silverado Trail winery built in 1988. "The greatest wines in the world are those that are elegant and complex. "We have vines that are 20 to 30 years old on average. I feel bringing a European sensibility to Napa Valley grapes is something we can do."

To that end, Morlet has teamed up with Pierre Birebent, who's been Signorello winemaker since 1997, to help Signorello meet this new challenge. Talking about his priorities, Morlet is a fan of organic composting "instead of using fertilizer — it keeps the soils healthy. It's important to keep yields under control, too." When harvest is imminent, Morlet insists on picking grapes that are "physiologically ripe. We pick in small lugs at night or early in the morning. We have three sortings (of the grapes) — cluster by cluster, grape by grape and with a new machine that I invented that separates out green berries and raisined fruit. And then we still inspect what's left by hand."

Morlet insists on "non-intervention in the cellar," using natural yeasts and producing wines that are "unfined and unfiltered." Born in a family that owns a Champagne house, Morlet has been making wine at a number of prominent wine estates owned by Peter Michael, Newton and Staglin. Last harvest was his first at Signorello Estate.



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