

From The Vine: Former St. Mary's standout carving his own path at Oakville winery

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NAPA — Joe Harden says he's lucky.

Considering he's only 32 years old and is the winemaker at the beautiful and iconic Nickel & Nickel Winery in Oakville, Napa Valley, he certainly is fortunate. But make no mistake. Harden's rise to the top at a young age in a high-pressure, competitive profession is by no means the result of chance.

Harden has created his own luck through talent, hard work and by trusting his instincts. He admits his father, Steve Harden, an executive sales manager with Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, cracked the door initially, but Joe has carved his own path. He is his own man.

Last week was a bit tense for Harden, a former basketball star at St. Mary's High School and University of California, Davis, as his first wine with Nickel & Nickel was bottled, the 2018 Chardonnay. Then and there and forever, his work in the vineyard and the cellar was manifested.

"It was exciting," Harden said. "It couldn't have gone smoother. We had no hiccups, no issues. I was able to enjoy a glass of wine (Thursday) night when we were all done and everything was stored away. The first one was a good one."

Nickel & Nickel was established in 1997 by the partners of Far Niente Winery in Napa and produces single-vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon from the appellation's most significant growing regions, as well as a small collection of single-vineyard Chardonnay, Merlot and Syrah. Harden joined Nickel & Nickel last year and the 2018 vintage is his first, with the reds currently aging in barrel.

Harden grew up on his family's 30-acre Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard in Acampo. The fruit went to Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville. Steve Harden, a former football player at University of the Pacific, knew the late legend, Mondavi, for many years. After graduating from St. Mary's in 2006, Joe Harden enrolled and played basketball at Notre Dame University. He had action in 14 games his freshman year. Harden said he enjoyed the experience, but he missed his family, with whom he is close. The 6-foot-7 Harden transferred to UC Davis to be closer to home. He sat out a year as a redshirt, then joined the Aggies' basketball team in 2008-09, reuniting with his friend and former St. Mary's High teammate, Mark Payne.

Harden was a two-time All-Big West Conference second-team selection and graduated in 2011 with a degree in viticulture and enology. He continued his basketball career with the Golden State Warriors' G-League team in Bismarck, North Dakota, and a professional team near Melbourne, Australia. In 2012, Harden accepted an internship with Robert Mondavi Winery, where he worked in the vineyards for a spell, then in the cellar with renowned winemaker Geneviève Janssens. In 2013,



Harden was promoted to enologist and in 2014, he was named assistant winemaker. Harden crafted Mondavi's Bordeaux varieties and oversaw production of the vaunted To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon wines.

In August 2018, Harden literally crossed the street to be the winemaker at Nickel & Nickel, one of five brands in Far Niente's portfolio that also includes Dolce Late Harvest, En Route Russian River Pinot Noir and Bella Union Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. Each brand has a separate winemaker under the supervision of director of winemaking Andrew Delos, who hired Harden.

"For me it's a great opportunity because you have your own space but you also get to work and bounce ideas off another set of four great winemakers," Harden said. "We do all function separately, but we are a team and all try to help each other get through harvest. It reminds me a lot of a sports team atmosphere, where you can rely on your colleagues."

Nickel & Nickel is a single-vineyard program that sources some of the most acclaimed vineyards in Napa Valley's Diamond Mountain, Calistoga, Howell Mountain, St. Helena, Rutherford, Oakville, Yountville and Stag's Leap districts. Harden's job is to coax the best expressions he can from each vineyard. It's precision grape growing and winemaking at its finest. He said he relishes the challenge.

"The reason I really wanted to go to Nickel & Nickel is the single-vineyard approach," Harden said. "Winemakers always talk about making a wine that has a sense of place and Nickel & Nickel, since the first vintage in 1997, has taken that to a whole different degree."

Harden said of all aspects in the winemaking process, he feels most at home working in the vineyards.

"What's great with wine is you've never figured out the craft. It's always evolving and you're always learning something," Harden said. "You're working with a team and it's a really great, healthy lifestyle where we work hard but we also have a really good time."

Joe and his wife Hannah, a former basketball player at the University of Utah and UC Davis, and sales manager at Kikori Whiskey in Napa, reside in Yountville.