

Makers speak of chardonnay

Two extremely competent and successful California winery owners recently were in town, both with interesting things to say about chardonnay, winemaking and wine selling.

Fred Fisher, a Michigan native, escaped many years ago to various lands. He has now found his calling as owner of the Sonoma winery that carries his name. The winery is in the western slopes of the Mayacmas Mountains that separate Napa and Sonoma.

Fisher produced his first commercial wine in 1979. His vineyard was planted to chardonnay and cabernet in 1974, and he sold off his initial grapes. In their fifth leaf, he deemed them ready to make wines bearing his name.

The occasion for Fisher's Detroit-area appearance was to unveil his new 1984 chardonnay. It will be marketed as the "Coach Insignia," a designation to be used hereafter with his top-of-the-line chardonnays and cabernets.

BEGINNING IN 1985, there will be two of each flavor each vintage, the lesser wine to be called a Napa-Sonoma. Not yet priced, this "C1" wine will be expensive, probably in the \$20 range. But such a wine!

It is almost thick, with honied overtones, abundant viscosity but not fat and buttery. Only 5 percent of the cuvee underwent malolactic fermentation: the lack of any sharp edges in this young wine comes from winemaking skills, not from induction. The use of ilmosin oak has been most judicious.

The premier showing of this wine was the only one nationally. A real tribute to the developing Michigan market.

Fisher also brought along his 1982 cabernet, tasted later in the meal with Bavarian Blue cheese and French bread (does the London Chop House ever miss?). Elegant, charming, full, yet delicate, this is a model cabernet, rivaling France's and California's best.

A couple of days earlier Cecil DeLoach hosted a variety of audiences at several tasting events, marking only his second-ever visit to our area (the first being the Sonoma Wine-growers event last spring).

HE IS ANOTHER Sonoma grower, whose wines offer further



wine

Richard Watson

evidence of the great leaps in quality that Sonoma wines are taking. Indeed, many wine observers — this one included — believe Sonoma has crept ahead of Napa with all wines except cabernet.

DeLoach Vineyards, some 10 miles west of Fisher in the western Russian River area, is a producer of 10 wines, an unusually large number these days. Full production this year will be in the range of 50,000 cases. Hardly small, DeLoach is a whole dimension apart from Fisher with its two wines at 8,000-cases-per-year production.

The tasting event reconformed for me that DeLoach is one of the most consistently superior wineries in all of California. I do not think he has every issued a weak wine. Most are excellent and, as important, affordable.

DeLoach delighted in telling the story of his original marketing strategy in 1977 when he began. He wanted to make only zinfandel, sell it all from the winery door and charge \$2 a bottle. Naive and ridiculous!

HIS FIRST customer was Robert Stemmer, then still at Charles Krag, who, upon tasting the wine, exploded, telling him he could not sell such a wine for \$2. Stemmer meant "only \$2," of course, but it took DeLoach a while to figure that out. Wise counsel, as it developed.

Today, DeLoach makes two chardonnays, both fume and sauvignon blanc (each treated distinctively to produce dramatically different expressions of this wine); two gewurztraminers, one a stunning late-harvest cabernet; pinot noir, a fine zinfandel, and the inevitable white zinfandel (which accounted for 20,000 of his cases in 1985). Asked why he made so many different wines for a winery of his size, he said, "Because I like to have fun doing this. I have three winemakers and I like to keep them all alert and interested."

Sebastian's experience falls short

SEBASTIAN'S, Somerset Mall, Troy (649-6623), offers an attractive, art deco appearance with a maritime theme as well. Fortunately, the oyster bar and piano provide a comfortable, inviting setting because we had to wait more than half an hour for our reservation to be honored. Although drinks were available, we were not offered an opportunity to order food while we waited. This beginning spoiled our first impressions, but after we were finally seated we appreciated the clean, modern, black-and-white table decor and the fresh flowers on the tables. Considerable care and attention have been paid to the physical setting, and the nicely dressed dinner crowd also adds to the atmosphere. Nonetheless, a 35-minute delay in sending our party (and others) is not acceptable. General Atmosphere — 15 points maximum. Points awarded — 11.

We had a delightful waitress who was as pleasant and cheerful as she could be. If only the service had been as professional as it was informal and friendly. The kitchen was slow, and the busing was uneven. We waited almost a half an hour from the time we were seated until bread and appetizers arrived. At least we were really hungry by then. Our waitress seemed to have

many tables to serve, but she was really trying hard to please us. In the end, though, three hours for dinner was too long — for us and for other tables seated when we were. Service — 15 points maximum. Points awarded — 9.

Each of the appetizers we tried was unusual and delicious. The gourmet pizza du jour (\$7.95), topped with seafoods, blended new tastes in a more traditional dish. It was not heavy, and we enjoyed it thoroughly. The ground seafood sausage with sauce moutarde over pasta (\$4.95) also combined flavors in an appealing way. The sausage was tangy, especially with the mustard sauce, and the pasta was fresh. The assortment of breads was far better than average, and the drinks were strong and reasonably priced. Drinks, Appetizers and Bread — 10 points maximum. Points awarded — 10.

An attractively presented salad is included with the meal, and it featured a good variety of vegetables, including tomatoes, cucumbers, mushrooms, alfalfa, onions and more. Dressing is served on the side so that it is difficult to toss and blend it with the salad. Everything was fresh and cold, including the fork. Salad — 5 points maximum. Points awarded — 4.



a counting for taste

D. Gustibus

After a good beginning, we were anticipating our entrees. They did not measure up to our hopes, even though each of the dishes was presented attractively. The swordfish (\$14.95) was an unusually thick steak, it had a strong taste unlike the swordfish we had eaten before. While the accompanying potatoes were good, the vegetables were only lukewarm. The barbecued yellow fin tuna (\$12.50) was especially peculiar. It tasted more like beef than fish, and there was no evidence of the sauce that it was supposed to have been cooked with. Best of the entrees was a daily special, poulet notre chef (\$14.95), a delicious chicken served in pastry. Again, cold vegetables detracted from the dish. Finally, the mélange of fresh seafood (\$15.50) provided lots of seafood and was presented imaginatively, but it had a bland taste. Entrees, Vegetables and Garnishes — 30 points maximum. Points awarded — 18.

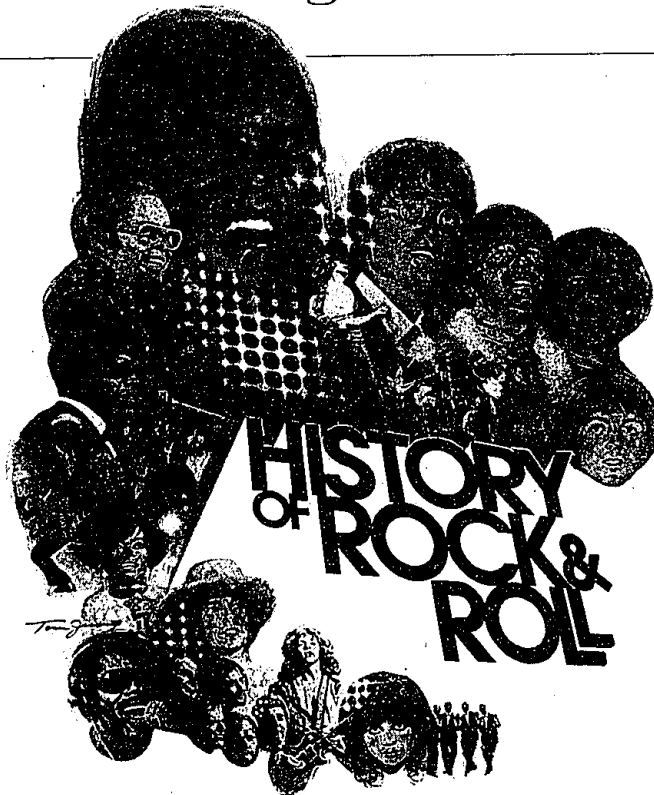
The desserts were a change for

the better. The white chocolate mousse with raspberry sauce (\$4.50) was just wonderful, light and delicate. The flavor was perfect, and we noticed a nearby group order a second serving for its table after the first one was gone. The carrot cake (\$3.50), however, was ordinary. It was not as rich in flavor as some others we have had. Dessert — 10 points maximum. Points awarded — 8.

We experienced good and bad during our three hours and 20 minutes at the restaurant, but over-all \$58 per couple with tip was too much considering the amount of negatives we found. Price/Value — 15 points maximum. Points awarded — 11.

A Counting for Taste — 100 points maximum. Total points awarded 71. Considering the money and care that has gone into Sebastian's, it is too bad that the dining experience falls short.

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