

FOCUS ON WINE



RAY & ELEANOR HEALD

Winemaker travels back to the future

In vintage 2000, Napa Valley's Robert Mondavi winery literally went back to the future in a new state-of-the-art winery.

Several years ago, Michael Mondavi, president and CEO of the family winery, and his brother Tim, managing director and winemaker, discussed updating their flagship winery in the heart of California's Napa Valley.

Built in 1966 by their father Robert, as the first winery in the world committed to using stainless steel fermenters, and expanded in 1968 to make 50,000 cases annually, it was operating at 10 times that.

The visitor center originally constructed to greet 50,000 guests, was hosting 450,000 annually. Expansion of every aspect at the Oakville winery was not possible. Since it was most obsolete, the Mondavis agreed to redo the fermentation facility and to concentrate on upgrading its 650-acre To Kalon vineyard, surrounding the present-day Robert Mondavi Winery.

They named these efforts, begun in 1999, as the To Kalon Project.

"We assessed what was needed in order to have the best red wine fermentation facility in the world," Michael explained. "From observations at our Byron Estate Winery, Opus One and Chateau Mouton-Rothschild in Bordeaux, we decided to go

back to the future and begin to ferment our best red wines in oak fermenters."

Tim insisted there was a difference in red wines fermented in oak, rather than in stainless steel. Michael remained skeptical so Tim organized a tasting of several experimental cabernet sauvignons, where the only variable was the fermenter. The oak-fermented wines were more pleasing with better mouthfeel.

Oak upright fermenters are esthetically beautiful, cost 50 percent more than a stainless steel tank of the same size, but from a qualitative point of view, the Mondavis believe they give red wines a softness and elegance that sets them apart. From our tasting, we agree. As young red wines, they have a richer mouthfeel with greater flavor, complexity and intensity, yet delicate finish.

The changeover

Crafted by Tonnellerie Taransaud in Cognac, 66 French oak upright 5,000-gallon capacity fermenters were disassembled and shipped to the U.S.

In the summer of 2000, a team of 14 French coopers took three weeks to reassemble the oak uprights in the new Robert Mondavi Winery for first use in vintage 2000.

French oak uprights function similarly to a barrel, without adding oak character to the wine. Even though they are toasted inside, they do not add a toasty or a vanilla character, but do promote greater complexity and better integration of tannins. Grapes fermented in the new oak upright fermenters in vintage 2000 came from To Kalon, the Mondavis prized cabernet sauvignon vineyard, which has significant firm grape tannins.

Tim considers the oak a perfect match.

However, innovation is not without risk and the biggest with oak fermenters is sanitation. It is the reason pro-

Please see WINE, D2

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Latin American foods
- 2 Unique



Plate of color: Gucchi Takayuki, general manager at Noble Fish in Clawson, arranges eye-appealing sushi on a plate. Takayuki insists the average cook can make the Japanese food at home with a little practice.

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Whether you're a seasoned sushi connoisseur or still mastering the art of the roll, the idea of preparing the bite size Japanese food at home seems a bit far-fetched.

With its bright colors, delicate size and ingenious presentation, sushi has the intimidating power of fine art. But just because it looks difficult to make, doesn't mean it is.

Having reached that very realization, an increasing number sushi lovers are purchasing the necessary tools and ingredients for home preparation, says Gucchi Takayuki, general manager at Noble Fish, a sushi bar and Japanese market in Clawson where the average lunch crowd exceeds 100 diners.

"They eat here for a while, then finally they buy the ingredients and make their own," says Takayuki.

Beyond the cost savings, making sushi at home is good, clean — the sticky rice can be awful messy — fun.

A growing trend among Takayuki's customers is the sushi party, which allows family and friends to get together in the kitchen and prepare their own meal or appetizer.

As with all cooking, there are techniques for making sushi and, as they say, practice makes perfect. "Try often," jokes Takayuki. "That's the best rule."

But Takayuki is quick to dismiss the idea that sushi need attain a level of aesthetic appeal to be savored.

"Don't worry," he says. "If it falls apart, just enjoy making it and eating it."

If there's an attitude to take with sushi, it's a lighthearted one, he says. After all, the food is associated with revelry and merrymaking in his country. "In Japan, sushi is a celebration food. When somebody dies, we don't eat sushi. When something bad happens, we don't eat sushi. Sushi is to enjoy. That's what it's all about."

Before technique comes shopping

The best place to start is probably an Asian market like Noble Fish where you can purchase both the ingredients and the tools you'll need to make sushi at home.

Noble Fish also sells a sushi cookbook (*Quick & Easy Sushi* by Heihachiro Tohyama and Yukiko Moriama, \$19.95) with recipes, instructions and illustrations.

Required tools and ingredients are a bamboo mat to roll the sushi, short grain Japanese sushi rice, rice wine vinegar, nori seaweed sheets and fillings for your sushi.

Sushi chefs work with a special sushi knife, but Takayuki says a chef knife will do the job. Sushi accoutrements include soy sauce (the type used in any Asian cooking will suffice), wasabi paste, a spicy horseradish that comes already pre-

Raw fish for sushi

■ Fish that is eaten raw as sushi must be prepared from fish that has been out of the water no longer than 24 hours.

■ Characteristics of fresh fish include: bright, clear and full eyes; bright red gills; bright sheen on scales; firm or rigid body when pressed with fingers; elastic flesh that does not separate from bones or indont; sweet taste; and cucumber-like odor.

■ Signs fish is old include: strong or "fishy" odor; milky or sullen eyes; muddy, gray scales; blemishes or scales or a slimy surface; red patches on ventral area; leathery appearance; and yellowing, browning or drying of flesh.

pared in a tube or in powder form to mix with water, and sweet pickled ginger, which can be purchased at an Asian market.

And though you probably won't find a bamboo rolling mat at your neighborhood supermarket, many sushi ingredients are stocked in the Asian foods section of large grocery stores.

When using raw fish, you must have no doubt what you're purchasing is fresh and suitable for sushi. And a fish market or fish monger is probably the best place from which to make your purchase. Raw fish in sushi has been removed from the water 24 hours ago or less. Again, if you have any doubts, don't eat the fish in raw form. You can always use cooked fish in sushi.

Also, don't use fresh water species. It's not used in sushi because of the possible presence of parasites.

In the kitchen

The next step is preparing your rice and sushi fillings. What's crucial here is how the rice is prepared and handled.

Generally speaking, ingredients for sushi are cut into long strips. If you're including raw fish, ask your fish monger to prepare each fillet for use in sushi.

Before cooking rice, wash it in a big bowl of water, rubbing grains gently. Drain off the water and repeat this step until the water is almost clear.

In general, equal amounts of rice and water are sufficient when cooking sushi rice, but preparing two cups rather than one is preferable. And while an automatic Japanese rice cooker is ideal, a Dutch oven or pot with a fitted lid and good heat distribution will do the job.

Just be sure to carefully measure rice and water and allow your rice to sit for 30 minutes in the summer and an hour in the winter before cooking (For detailed instructions, see *Cooking Sushi Rice and Preparing Rice for Sushi*).

Ready to roll
When all your ingredients are ready, set them out in containers near a clean, dry work surface. Since sushi rice is sticky and difficult to handle, fill a small bowl with ice water and

mix in about a tablespoon of rice wine vinegar. After handling rice, dip fingers into the bowl to remove rice and clean hands.

The sushi chefs at Noble Fish also cover their bamboo rolling mats with plastic wrap

to prevent the rice from sticking to the mat. The chefs also use plastic wrap to cover the sushi when they are finished.

Please see SUSHI, D2

Artful edibles

You'll know sushi once you create your own delicacies



Layer of rice: After placing a half sheet of nori seaweed on the bamboo rolling mat, use hands to add rice, about 1/8 inch in thickness.



Fill it up: Place preferred fillings, side-by-side, in the center of the nori and rice. Being made here is an inside-out roll in which rice, rather than nori, forms the roll's outer layer. This can be done by flipping the rice-layer side of the nori over on the mat before adding fillings.



Time to roll: To roll sushi, bring thumbs underneath the rolling mat and use fingers to tuck in the fillings.



Tight roll: After rolling the mat over one more time and applying pressure to the roll with your thumbs and fingers, the roll is finished and ready for cutting.



Make the cut: Using a sushi or Chef knife, cut each roll in half and then into six or eight pieces depending on size.