



A Nichols Worth of Wine

Around Town

August 2007

It all started simply enough. All I wanted was a tomato that tasted like, well, like a tomato. I love a lot of things about Florida and about Naples in particular, but local tomatoes are not one of them. I have spent some time in “tomato paradise”, better known to many as the Garden State of New Jersey, and *jersey beefsteaks* are to tomatoes, what Romanee-Conti is to pinot noir. Tomatoes just do not get any better!

Great “jersey” beefsteaks can come from a fairly wide boundary that would include the lower half of eastern Pennsylvania to northern Maryland (north of Washington D.C.). Now that I had established this arbitrary tomato appellation, I was ecstatic when I read an ad that Oakes Farms, on Davis Boulevard, just east of 41, ran in Naples Illustrated magazine. They were promoting their fresh vegetables, including produce from Amish country, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Could it be? Might I just find a tomato worthy of nothing more than a pinch of sea salt and just two twists of the pepper grinder?

The answer is... yes! Baskets of huge, red, ripe jersey beefsteaks lined the shelves of Oakes Farms on my first visit on a sweltering afternoon in early August. Never mind that a small sign read that these crimson beauties were from Maryland. They shared a border with Jersey. I filled my basket with tomatoes, Pennsylvania corn, and zucchini from an undisclosed location. I have always thought that you can tell the quality of a grocery store by the customers it serves. I knew this store had something going for it when on successive visits, I ran into two of Naples top executive chefs shopping for produce at Oakes Farms. A very good sign indeed.

Originally, I dismissed Oakes Farms wine program based on their advertising claiming that they offered “*Yellowtail at \$4.99, all the time*”. Sure Yellowtail is the largest selling wine in America today, but it is not to my taste. Heading for the cashier though, I noticed that the far corner of the store held a wall of wine. Forever tempted at the sight of yet more wine to explore, I discovered a cache of attractively priced bottles. How does *Mollydooker* at \$21 sound? This Australian shiraz is an outstanding wine that Robert Parker and Wine Spectator consistently score in the 90’s. Other gems included a number of California chardonnays from the respected 2004 vintage and a 1999 Brunello di Montalcino, as well as many more of these Tuscan treats from the very good 2001 and 2004 vintages. Very impressive. I had to meet the wine buyer!

I sat down a few weeks after my first visit with Perry Shepard, Oakes Farms wine manager, who does double duty on the grocery side of the store. While Oakes Farms has been in its current location for eleven years, Perry – who describes himself as “*one guy in a fruit store*”, left a career as a sales rep selling wine for Premier Beverage four years ago to work for the Oakes brothers, Al and Eric. Perry’s passions for food and wine is evident as he gushes about the brothers resolve to provide the freshest and most wholesome produce and food products in the Naples area. This is overwhelmingly evident as you walk through the store and grasp their

incredible selection of fruits and vegetables that look as though they were just brought in from the fields that morning. And some of it was! The brothers, along with their father, Frank Oakes – who owns and operates Food and Thought, an organic grocer in central Naples, have a sizable farm in Immokalee.

But it is the numerous farmer relationships up and down the eastern seaboard and around the country that provides the variety and quality of produce that sets Oakes Farms apart from any local grocer, big and small, in the greater Naples area. The morning I met with Perry, walking the aisles, I found six varieties of Washington state apples, seven types of potatoes – including a variety from Louisiana (!), an item known as “California Dinosaur Eggs” which are described as a cross between an apricot and a plum and Virginia-grown “donut” peaches. But it was the huge selection of produce the Oakes family brought in from the Amish farms of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, that caught my eye. These products don’t first spend up to a week in a warehouse like the fruit and vegetables most of the big box stores offer. The family owns and operates seven of their own rigs which truck the produce from these farms to their stores overnight.

In addition to the fabulous produce, Oakes Farms offers a very large selection of certified organic products like grass-fed cow’s milk and free-range brown eggs as well as artisan-style breads, a delicatessen, their own line of dressings and jams, and Black Angus beef.

In the short time Perry has been at Oakes Farms, he has grown the wine program from being virtually nonexistent – he helped the brothers obtain the required licensing to sell wines - to what is now 23% of the store’s revenue. Certainly the produce and food products are what bring most customers into the store, but Perry has built a loyal following of wine enthusiasts who come in to only buy wine. In fact, the well-thought out selection and attractive low margin pricing strategy has led to many case-lot buyers.

When I mentioned to Perry the considerable saturation of Naples wine merchants, including huge discounters like WalMart, Sam’s Club, the grocers and drug chains, and asked who he considered his strongest competition, his unexpected reply was Costco, ABC, and the like. These are all considerably bigger volume stores, but because Perry prices his wines so aggressively (low), he honestly believes this is who he competes with. Given some of what I saw on the shelves, I would have to agree. There are labels from all of the world’s major growing regions with thoughtfully selected wineries represented. In addition to the limited *Mollydooker* I mentioned earlier, I was able to pick up a big, juicy California pinot noir (2005 MacMurray Ranch for \$15), a solid Spanish sauvignon blanc (Condesa de Langaza @ \$7) and a Chilean red (Balduzzi Grand Riserva - \$14) While depth in terms of older vintages are limited, Perry through his previous contacts in the wine distribution business, has access to everything available, including “library wines” the wholesalers sometimes stock. He acknowledges that due to the store’s current space restrictions, he cannot carry the number or selection of wines of these bigger stores, but he is committed to offering his customers, many of who travel considerable distance to shop here, the “best wines at the best prices”.

Oakes Farms is a well-kept secret, especially when it comes to wine, and you’re just not going to find a store that offers a better selection of amazingly fresh produce and reasonably priced wine. Located just south of downtown Naples, you owe it to yourself to stop by Oakes Farms and pick up some “real” tomatoes and talk wines with Perry. I think you’ll be more than pleased!

Did you know...

The higher the alcohol level in wine, the less compatible it is with food.