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## Darioush's new digs recreate Persian palace

Thursday, August 19, 2004

By L. PIERCE CARSON  
Register Staff Writer

Integrating a passion for wine with the history of his birthplace, vintner Darioush Khaledi is inviting the public to tour and taste these days at a spectacular new wine estate along Silverado Trail.

A production cellar, visitors center and residence make up the 22,000 square foot structure designed in the image of significant historic ruins in Khaledi's native Iran.

Sculpted, iconographic columns beckon visitors as they drive through the gate and vineyards at 4240 Silverado Trail.

The giant stone structure is a marvel of modern architecture, built with Persian straw travertine mined from quarries located not far from Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of ancient Iran founded by Darius the Great in 522 B.C. In fact, stone from these same quarries was used to construct Persepolis palaces.

Situated some 30 miles from Shiraz -- which is where many believe grapegrowing has its roots -- Persepolis is a Greek name, meaning "city of Persians."

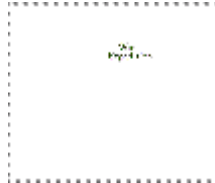
Darius, called the king of kings, created an impressive palace complex there inspired by Mesopotamian models. The splendor of Persepolis was short-lived, however, as the palaces were looted and burned by Alexander the Great in 331-330 B.C.

Not excavated until 1931, the importance and quality of these monumental ruins make it a unique archeological site. Only the columns, stairways and door jambs of the great palaces survived the spectacular fire.

And it's the tremendous columns of this historic cradle of civilization that inspired architect Ardishir Nozari, from the Santa Monica firm of Nozari & Nozari, in bringing Khaledi's enological dream to life.

As workmen worked feverishly to make everything ready for last Saturday's opening to the public, a tour of the visitor center, chai, fermentation cellar and offices with winery president Bernard La Borie provided insight behind this three-year construction effort undertaken by James Nolan Construction, the project's general contractor.

"There are four elements to Darioush," La Borie points out. "There's the very modern visitors center, administrative offices, along with the barrel chai, and finally, the two-story section is the private residence for Darioush himself."



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Column rows at the front of the palatial structure draw visitors inside, where even more columns continue to be a focal point for the well-appointed space where wine lovers will gather to taste estate wines and drink in a rather unique slant of Napa Valley ambiance.

The orange and red color scheme, with splashes of deep purple, speak more to Seville than Yountville. At its northernmost wall, a conference room overlooks an outdoor amphitheater, constructed in the style of the ancients, that soon will be plumped up with colorful Persian cushions. Lectures and special intimate concerts will be on the agenda here.

Sliding glass doors and a working fireplace separate the uber-modern offices from the eye-popping visitors center. A quartet of sculpted bronze soldiers will stand sentinel around the hearth -- once they arrive.

The decidedly 21st century hospitality center is appointed with eye-catching Italian furniture and German light fixtures of varying designs. A glass skylight allows for plenty of ambient light, but electric curtains can be drawn should the noonday sun prove too intense.

Stark but comfortable couches are positioned around the large interior space, some surrounding glass tables that provide a glimpse into the aging cellar one floor below. Visitors can taste wine while seated on the couches or on highback chairs that line a central counter whose granite top has been polished to a high sheen.

The fermentation tank room is in plain view from the visitors center's tasting island. It will stand out even more as the walls will soon be painted purple.

La Borie points out Darioush will feature hospitality and concierge services unique to the wine industry and modeled after the world's top luxury hotels. For example, a visitor pulls up a chair at the tasting counter and immediately receives his or her own bottle of Norwegian Voss bottled water. And the price is right, adds La Borie. "Where other wineries are charging as much as \$25 for a tasting, we are offering our visitors a flight of wines for only \$10."

Visitors can take an elevator down to the barrel chai, or amble down and up a set of stairs parted by a three-story waterfall. Here they can check out Darioush red wines as they age for their first year in French oak barrels. In addition, there's a room dedicated to food and wine pairing where one restaurant and chef each month will be singled out to serve dishes matching the flavor profiles of Darioush wines. La Borie says the chefs will be selected from all over the country.

It is here in this underground space that visitors also get a glimpse of the property's bedrock, which, according to La Borie inspired Khaledi to purchase the property in 1997.

#### Wines and celebrations

The Darioush Estate also contains 33 acres of vines, with another 70 acres of vines located off site. The vineyards adjacent to the winery contain cabernet sauvignon, merlot, shiraz, and small amounts of petit verdot and malbec.

Total annual production at Darioush is 10,000 cases, with approximately 95 percent of this output allotted to the winery's Signature Series bottlings. These estate wines include cabernet sauvignon, shiraz, merlot, chardonnay and viognier. The Estate series -- which can be tasted for only \$5 a flight -- including chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and a red table wine blend.

In addition, winemaker Steve Devitt sets aside six to eight barrels of the best

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red wines each harvest, La Borie says. These wines are then bottled separately with a Darius label, which retail for \$115 each. Retail prices of the Signature wines range from \$32 for viognier to \$64 for cabernet and shiraz, while the Estate Series range from \$22 for the chardonnay to \$38 for the red table blend.

Darioush has scheduled six open houses during the month of September to which area residents and members of the hospitality industry will be invited. A gala opening celebration is now being planned for October, added La Borie.

Darioush is open daily to visitors from 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. For additional information, call 257-2345.



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