Paid parking lot exceeds expectations

The town’s new paid parking lot, operated by Violet Park of America, has exceeded expectations, according to selectman Bruce Miller, who was instrumental in convincing National Grid to open up the property to parking.

In its first 30 days of operation, Violet Park of America parked 1,967 cars in the lot, located off Candle Street in downtown Nantucket, at a rate of roughly 65 per day.

On Aug. 2 and 3, the lot had its two busiest days of the summer, when 142 and 146 drivers paid to have their cars parked, respectively.

Drivers pay three separate rates to park in the lot: $15 for the day (9 a.m. to 5 p.m.), or $10 between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., and $8 from 2 p.m. to midnight.

DeMarco sauce now for sale at Boston Whole Foods

Tom DeMarco, former owner of DeMarco Italian Restaurant on Nantucket until closing it last year, said this week the DeMarco Good Family Food Products pasta sauce is now for sale at the Whole Foods supermarket on Cambridge Street in Boston.

DeMarco’s sauce is also available in a number of other retail locations on the island and around the region.

Town clerk’s office closing early Aug. 27

The Nantucket Island Town Clerk’s Office in the Town Hall on Main Street will close at 3:30 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 27, for a state-related training webinar. It will reopen Wednesday, Aug. 28 at 8 a.m.

Chamber holding "oldest guide" contest

The Nantucket Chamber of Commerce is currently sponsoring a contest with the following challenge: bring in to the Chamber office, upstairs at Zero Main Street, your oldest copy of its annual “Official Guide to Nantucket” for a chance to win a bag of “swag,” including gift certificates to local restaurants, T-shirts and more donated by Chamber members.

The contest has an annual print run of 40,000 copies of that distributed worldwide.

The deadline for submissions is Wednesday, Aug. 28, with the winner to be announced Friday, Aug. 30. For more information, call the Chamber at (508) 228-3043.

Topper’s wins its 17th straight Grand Award from Wine Spectator

By Jen Lansey

Contributing Writer

If you’ve ever treated yourself to a meal at Topper’s at The Wawhinet and nosed through the wine list, you know what a hefty tome it is.

You could easily spend an hour or more poring through it, sipping up rare vintages of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Mouton Rothschild, and Château Pichon, and exploring an impressive array of unusual selections from winemaking regions as far-flung as Slovenia, Morocco and the Middle East.

The revered list at Topper’s maintains a steady allure, and it’s not just devoted diners who think so. Recently, Topper’s won Wine Spectator’s Grand Award — the publication’s highest honor for a restaurant’s wine list — for the 17th year in a row.

Only about 13 other restaurants in the world have held the Grand Award consecutively for the same amount of time as (or longer than) Topper’s, and only four have held it each year since its inception in 1980. This year, just two other restaurants in Massachusetts — in all of New England, for that matter — received the Grand Award. Neither of them are Nantucket establishments, but American Seasons did earn the second Best Award of Excellence; and several other island restaurants, including The Boarding House, Cru, Salutation, Le Beaufort, and the Inn at Bay Point were granted the publication’s basic Award of Excellence.

Cellar master Craig Hanna, a 23-year veteran of Topper’s, began working with the restaurant’s wine program in 1996, the same year it won its first Grand Award, and two years later became the cellar master, directly responsible for maintaining the list the last 15 of Topper’s 17 Grand Awards.

For nearly two decades, Hanna has been honing Topper’s wine list, which features 1,450 different selections from wine regions around the globe with a special emphasis on Bordeaux and the Rhône in France, Piedmont in Italy, and an extensive subset of half-bottle offerings. But it’s not just the sheer number of labels that consistently earns Topper’s the publication’s highest honor.

Wine Spectator editors also evaluate Grand Award winners based on their representation of top producers and their selection of mature vintages as well as large-format bottles. They consider how well the wines complement the cuisine, the level of organization, presentation and service, and the restaurant’s uncompromising devotion to the quality of the wine program.

Originally from central Vermont, the master of wines at Topper’s said it was Peter Wallace, formerly the executive chef at The Westmoor Club, Oran

“Remember tasting the first great white burgundy you’d ever had, and it was like, whoa, now I understand why people drink this stuff.”

— Craig Hanna, Cellar master at Topper’s

Mcr and (Topper’s) who led him to Nantucket. The two went to high school together and they both worked the restaurant scene in the Killington ski area.

After college, Hanna joined Wallace on Nantucket and tended bar for a summer season at the Indus House, where Wallace was cooking. It was there that Hanna had one of his most memorable early wine experiences.

“I remember tasting the first great white burgundy I’d ever had, and it was like, whoa, now I understand why people drink this stuff,” he recalled with a nostalgic smile.

When Wallace became the chef at Topper’s, Hanna, who had been working in Washington state for several years, returned east, and was hired as the maître d’. A few years later, Hanna took on the role of cellar master.

Much like a self-taught chef, Hanna developed his wine chops on the job through years of wine-tasting, sommelier service and winter travels to the world’s top wine regions.

For a few years while he was the maître d’ at Topper’s, he worked alongside Michael Fabey, who transitioned Topper’s original all-American wine list into a more international selection with a focus on French wines.

Hanna has gone on to significantly increase the Italian offerings and add wines from other parts of the world, such as South Africa, New Zealand, Corsica, Greece, Spain and Lebanon.

At one point, he pulled out an old wine list to illustrate the difference in size between the early wine offerings and the current selections.

“It’s only three pages,” he said, smiling, as he flipped through the skinny menu.

Owning an award-winning wine list, working in a box setting, and getting out at the hour when most other people are binging on the island’s most elite visitors seems like quite the glamorous gig, but Hanna said that while the best part of his job does involve building relationships with guests and guiding them toward exciting wine selections, it’s not all sipping and socializing.

“Being in charge of a big wine list is really a lot like being a librarian,” he conceded.

The 1,450 labels on Topper’s wine list translate into approximately 20,000 bottles of wine that Hanna organizes and maintains in three different temperature-controlled “cellars” (3,000 of which are actually underground).

Despite the luxury location and the extraordinary contexts, Topper’s cellars themselves are surprisingly bare bones. The main cellar off the kitchen is not much more than a converted walk-in refrigerator with two aisles of floor-to-ceiling shelving that Hanna built with his father years ago. It’s close quarters, especially for a stripping guy like Hanna. But despite looking a bit like the proverbial bull in a china shop, he navigates this nexus of his inventory deftly and with an impressive amount of grace.

“It looks small,” he said, sandwiched between two walls of wine, “but it’s amazing how much you can fit in this small space.”

The official Cellar, which gets stocked daily for lunch and dinner service, holds 6,000 bottles.

Aside from the bottlings themselves, the only decorative element of the cellar is a patchwork of labels peeled from some of the restaurant’s most prized bottles, and then affixed to a few bare spots on the walls.

“It’s funny,” Hanna said. “With some wines, you’re so happy when you find them. And then, all of a sudden you sell one, and you’re like, ‘Oh my God, it took me two and a half years.’”
H2O LIGHT SHOW: Large yachts are berthed on the outside of the Nantucket Boat Basin Monday evening. Lights from the dock illuminate the basin waters with an eerie green glow at sunset.

Topper’s: First class wine list maintained

(Continued from page 4A)

years to get that. How am I ever going to replace it?” Thus, the cellar wall pays homage to some of the great wines. Hanna and his sommeliers have said that they’ll never see again.

Topper’s does not possess large quantities of any particular wine. Rather, it has small quantities of many, many wines. When stock begins to dwindle or runs out completely, Hanna usually replaces it with something very similar, or with the same wine in a newer vintage.

About a third of the time, however, he uses it as an opportunity to evolve the list, to switch out some Spanish wines for South American, for example, or to change up a few California pinot noirs with some from Oregon. Currently, he’s plotting to add wines from Croatia, Georgia (the country), Crimea and, more locally, Long Island, and he’s always on the lookout for the most sought-after wines in each category of his wine list.

He says that on average, Topper’s runs out of four to seven wines a day, so the wine list is always in transition, and as a result, it gets updated two to three times a week. Keeping tabs on the wine world is another key factor when replenishing the wine stock. Right now, Burgundy is a major concern.

“We’ve had three very short vintages in terms of production in Burgundy, which is our main focus, and they’ve just had a terrible hailstorm and flooding this year,” said Hanna, who is now strategically stocking up on age-worthy 2008 and 2010 Burgundy vintages.

In addition to his librarian-like duties of stocking and maintaining Topper’s wine cellar and providing world-class sommelier service, Hanna oversees the rest of the beverage program (including spirits, cocktails, glassware and accounting), supervises the bar and sommelier staff, and collaborates with chef Kyle Zachary on the tasting menus.

Hanna said there is “a uniqueness to Chef Kyle’s cuisine” that he admires.

“Chef Kyle puts a lot of focus into all elements of a dish,” he said, which presents a certain challenge for him.

When it comes to the tasting menu, Hanna said, he’s more likely to focus on weight than trying to match wines to the complex flavor profiles that Zachary and his executive sous chef Tom Pearson infuse into each course. Another element Hanna considers when selecting wines for the tasting menus is that many wine connoisseurs look to the tasting menu for exposure to wines that will be new to them, so he’s always looking to include intriguing pairings that guests will find stimulating.

With all his years of experience serving the world’s best wines at one of Nantucket’s most acclaimed restaurants, Hanna could easily be a very persnickety sommelier, but he is remarkably modest with a strong work ethic and a generous demeanor that suggests he could strike up a great conversation with anybody—qualities that have surely helped him excel in his role over the years.

He certainly doesn’t seem to have let his 15-year reign as a Wine Spectator Grand Award-winning cellar master go to his head either. Rather, he credits Topper’s owners with making the wine program possible, pointing out that it wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for the Stephen and Jill Karp’s investing in it. He is also quick to acknowledge what great culinary company he finds himself in on Nantucket.

“We’re blessed to be on this island,” he said. “The wines and cuisines being offered here are exceptional, and I think the selection is better now than it has ever been.”

Hanna also gave a nod to his staff and Topper’s clientele, who, he said, make his job a lot easier and make him look forward to going to work— even in August.

“We’re on the far end of a faraway island and we try to promote great service and great food with great wine for our guests,” Hanna said. With 23 years of that level of devotion, it’s no wonder that Wine Spectator and such a high proportion of the restaurant’s clientele keep returning to toasting at Topper’s time and again.