

MOTOR TREND



Don't Miss: Far Niente Winery and Nickel Family Car Collection

by Matt Stone 061809

We of course don't condone drinking and driving. But these two divergent concepts intersect nicely (and legally) at Far Niente Winery. The late Gil Nickel would call himself "a farmer" in the sense that late F1 champ and Le Mans winner Phil Hill labeled himself "a mechanic." In 1976, Nickel left the family's Oklahoma-based nursery business for good to chase his personal Field of Dreams in California's then-not-as-famous Napa Valley wine region.



The Far Niente Winery was among the early settlers of the Napa region, but had been out of business for nearly 60 years when Nickel acquired the abandoned, rundown property. Three years worth of labor and untold investment later, Far Niente re-opened, and hasn't looked back.

Nickel was also a committed car nut, motorcyclist, and vintage racer. He and wife Beth made room on the Far Niente grounds for a toy barn that any one of us would sacrifice greatly to have. Affectionately dubbed "Gil's Place," this is no museum: it is the Nickel family's personal collection, and they'll share it with anyone taking a Far Niente Winery tour and tasting.

The hardware is interesting and eclectic; obviously gathered to taste and for driving pleasure. The star of the collection is Nickel's Vignale-bodied '51 Ferrari 340 America roadster. On the other end of the scale are things like an early 50s Chevy panel van, and a London taxi, a long ago present from Mr. to Mrs. Nickel.

Nickel's dominant theme is sports cars, including a XK-120, a '61 Vette, a Ferrari Daytona, and a Porsche 356 Speedster, among others. Note the matched pair of Bentley Continental Rs -- one from the 50s, the other from the 90s.

Technically in Oakville, Far Niente is among the most attractive winery and vineyard properties in the region. It's worth seeing for the facility alone. The wines are of high quality, although some seem a smidge pricey. No matter, we recommend the tour/wine/cheese tasting combo. It lasts several hours, is a wonderful experience, and includes a no-hurry look at one helluva car collection.

Here's to you, Gil Nickel, and thanks for sharing.

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707/944-2861. Tour reservations required.*