



FAR NIENTE: ONE OF THE NAPA VALLEY'S ORIGINAL 19th CENTURY STONE WINERIES

Producer of possibly the oldest bottle of California wine

Oakville, CA – Far Niente, renowned for its production of Napa Valley Estate Chardonnay and Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon, was one of Napa Valley's original stone wineries at the time of its construction in the late 19th century. The winery stands today as a stunning example of the region's early winemaking heritage.

Far Niente was founded in 1885 by John Benson, an original forty-niner of the California gold rush and uncle of the artist, Winslow Homer. Benson hired architect Hamden McIntyre, creator of the former Christian Brothers winery, now the Culinary Institute of America, and the Gustav Niebaum winery, (today's Niebaum-Coppola), to design the building. Constructed against a hillside in western Oakville, Far Niente functioned as a gravity flow winery, gently moving the grapes through each stage of production. Benson named the winery "Far Niente," taken from the Italian phrase "Dolce Far Niente," meaning, "sweet to do nothing."

Far Niente prospered until its abandonment in 1919 with the onset of Prohibition, and was left untouched for sixty years until 1979, when Gil Nickel purchased the winery and adjacent vineyard. Nickel, a physicist by education with a background in agriculture through his family's nursery business, relocated to California with a quest to create a world-class Napa Valley wine estate. He found his charge in the then-fragile Far Niente. Beginning in 1979, Nickel undertook a three-year restoration of the winery, while simultaneously taking courses in the enology and viticulture program at the University of California at Davis.

Nineteen eighty-two marked the return of winemaking to Far Niente, with the harvest of the winery's first Cabernet Sauvignon. Chardonnay was also produced at the winery for the first time that year. Although Nickel made Far Niente Chardonnay in 1979, 1980 and 1981, the wines were made at a warehouse in Sausalito. Today, the winery continues to focus on producing only the two varietal wines.

California's oldest bottle of wine

Far Niente's past and present were reunited in 1998, when a bottle of Far Niente Sweet Muscat, vintage 1886, was discovered in a private cellar in Marin County. The bottle exhibits the original label, cork and capsule, and is believed to be the oldest intact bottle of California wine in existence today.

The label, featuring a sepia-tone line drawing of a hammock overflowing with grape clusters, is thought to have been designed by Benson's nephew, the artist Winslow Homer. Historians of the artist compare the style of the hammock on the label to the same technique employed in Homer's other works, but cannot provide authentication since the label is unsigned.

Far Niente's modern label design was created by Marin artist Tom Rodrigues, with the introduction of the winery's first vintages of Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Far Niente Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon are widely recognized by critics, the trade and collectors as being among the most consistent wines produced in every vintage. The partners' ability to maintain an uncluttered vision of excellence, paired with a focus on "house style" and vineyard ownership, is largely responsible for the winery's continued success as one of the world's great wine-producing estates.

XX

Contact: Mary Grace
(707) 944-2861, ext. 339
mgrace@farniente.com