



The Napa Valley Wine Estate

AT FAR NIENTE, ESTATE VINEYARDS AND HOUSE STYLE CREATE A LUXURY BLEND

Oakville, CA – Far Niente Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon are widely recognized by critics, the trade and collectors as being among the most consistently excellent wines produced in every vintage. 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.

The precedent was set by Gil Nickel, who brought Far Niente back to life when he purchased the dilapidated, late-nineteenth century estate in 1979. Drawing inspiration from Corton Charlemagne and Lafite, Nickel determined to produce just two wines -- Chardonnay, which was introduced the same year he purchased the winery, and Cabernet Sauvignon, first produced in 1982. At the same time, Nickel undertook a three-year restoration of the Far Niente property, which earned the winery its place on the National Register of Historic Places and recognition as one of the most beautiful and exclusive locales in the Napa Valley.

Having assembled his team by hiring Dirk Hampson in 1982 to manage the winemaking, and Larry Maguire in early 1983 to direct sales and marketing, Nickel’s plan was put into action. Nearly twenty years later, in 2002, the partners welcomed a fourth member, Gil’s nephew, Erik Nickel. Gil’s plan was to lay the groundwork for the next generation of winery management, which proved fortuitous upon his passing in late 2003. Today, Maguire, Hampson and the younger Nickel serve as managing partners for Far Niente and sister wineries, Dolce and Nickel & Nickel.

An Uncluttered Vision

“Style is every bit as much what you choose not to do, as what you choose to do, and there are a number of things we’ve chosen not to do at Far Niente,” states Hampson. “On the other hand, we’ve chosen to produce only two wines.”

Such a limited production is somewhat rare among California wineries, but the Far Niente partners made the decision in the interest of achieving the highest quality possible in the wines. There are no other products to distract the winemaker’s focus and potentially compromise quality.

“Our observation is there are a very limited number of wineries that are truly internationally famous for one product, and a tiny number recognized for two wines – we think we’re one of them,” says Hampson.

This clear vision extends to all arms of the Far Niente business, including its two sister wineries. Dolce, introduced with the 1989 vintage, is the only North American winery devoted to producing a single, late harvest wine. Nickel & Nickel, founded in 1997, is centered on a vineyard-based philosophy and produces only small-lot, 100 percent varietal, single-vineyard wines. Each winery has its own winemaker and vineyards, but is linked through the partnership.

Maguire points to the shared viewpoint of the partners as key to the winery’s clarity of vision. “We didn’t just meet and discover that we naturally share the same point of view. Our common vision has developed over traveling and tasting together, spending late nights around the dinner table, visiting some of the world’s great producers, agreeing and disagreeing with each other. One of the facets that makes Far Niente so unique is that we’ve taken these shared experiences and shaped a world view of producing wine, not simply a parochial view,” says Maguire.

House Style

If there is one central theme that infuses the winemaking program at Far Niente, it is the concept of house style. In its essence, house style is the blend of the vineyards with the winery’s personality and winemaking priorities, as expressed through the wines. Although the wines are different in each vintage, a thread of similarity ties them together.

“Ideally, all the vintages are kissing cousins. Even though each wine is unique because of its vintage, a vertical tasting would show a relationship and consistency among the wines,” says Hampson.

Far Niente Chardonnay is marked by classic proportions of structure, elegance, style and length. The absence of malolactic fermentation provides the Chardonnay with the ability to age gracefully for several years after release, which is unusual for California Chardonnay. “We’re not trying to impress with weight, sugar, excessive volume or over-use of ML or oak,” explains Hampson. “Our Chardonnay ends up being incredibly pleasing, or, if one chooses to look deeper, it’s incredibly complex and challenging.”

Far Niente Cabernet Sauvignon has always been blended primarily from Oakville fruit, but in 2001, the wine’s designation was changed to Oakville Estate, requiring that the Cabernet be produced only from Oakville vineyards owned or controlled by the winery.

The result is classically structured Cabernets that are rich in flavor, complex and long, with supple tannins. Elegant and food friendly, the wines display cassis and blackberry notes along with spicy oak aromas that have become synonymous with the Far Niente house style.

For Maguire, the hallmark of Far Niente house style is the midpalate of the wines. “Middle palate is very important in all of our wines – a certain weight in the center of the mouth. In some wines, the taste is all up front and while there may be a finish, it’s like an egg without the yolk.”

When it comes to marketing the concept of house style, Maguire takes a practical approach. “Because of our pursuit of house style, consumers know what to expect from us and can feel comfortable purchasing a new vintage without having tasted it first.”

Vineyard Ownership

At the root of the Far Niente philosophy of house style and dedication to quality, are the 250 acres of owned vineyards, which allow for the production of estate bottled wines.

The Martin Stelling Vineyard was the first parcel that was acquired, and it was included as part of the winery purchase agreement in 1979. It is one of the most famous sites for growing exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon in Oakville, and it is the main source for Far Niente Cabernet. Situated along the base of the western hills, this 100-acre vineyard was first planted in the late 1970s. Year after year, Martin Stelling Vineyard grows classically elegant Cabernets with beautiful structure and complexity.

The Sullenger Vineyard in Oakville, which is home to Nickel & Nickel winery, also contributes to the blend. Far Niente Cabernet Sauvignon is a 100% Oakville estate wine.

Far Niente Chardonnay is a blend of superlative Napa Valley vineyards, many of which are located in a little-known area called Coombsville, a cool growing region nestled in the rolling countryside and protected by the hills east of the city of Napa. Coombsville offers the characteristic climate of Carneros, with less wind, along with deeper, well-drained gravelly loam and volcanic ash soils.

For more than two decades, Far Niente has grown and prospered in the luxury segment of the fine wine industry, and the partners credit much of their success to a focus on producing just two wines at the best possible level, and tuning out the clutter and trends that phase in and out of the wine industry. Much like other luxury goods companies, limited production and continued refinement is key.

“Ultimately, for the greatest wineries, the concept of estate is fundamental to house style, longevity and success,” comments Hampson. “All of that is implied with what we’re trying to achieve. What we want is a business, an image and a product that carry meaning for those of us lucky enough to drink and enjoy it.”