



Getting Cabernet Down to a Science at Far Niente



© Far Niente | Balance is key in Far Niente's Napa wines.

W. Blake Gray finds a Californian winery that's more interested in science than it is in tradition.

By W. Blake Gray | Posted Monday, 19-Oct-2015

For 20 years, Far Niente used first-growth Bordeaux as a benchmark. Then came a tasting when they decided they could do better.

The year was 2001. California "cult Cabernets" were getting lots of attention and high critics' ratings, especially after the 1997 vintage. But the question was, would they stand the test of time? Far Niente founder Gil Nickel, a scientist who had worked in guided missile analysis, decided to try to find out.

"We did a tasting with 12 vintages: us, Harlan, Screaming Eagle, Randy Lewis' Cab," says Far Niente President Larry Maguire. "After that, we realized that no longer did we need to use Bordeaux as a reference. The Harlans were over the top to me. Those wines had passed the line to being prune-like. But the '94 Screaming Eagle was the most interesting wine I'd ever tasted. Screaming Eagle had this impeccable balance. It had all this really pure fruit but wasn't too ripe. It was an impeccably balanced, rich Cabernet. We always wanted to bring more midpalate weight to our wines without going over the top or being flabby."

That anecdote tells the whole story of Far Niente. It has plenty of resources, including 230 acres of grapes in Napa Valley, with access to another 170 through its farm management arm. It makes ripe wines, but strives for balance. And it believes in science.

Example: Greg Allen, winemaker for Dolce, Far Niente's terrific sweet wine, had an unusual career path. He had been a research scientist in orthopedic biomechanics, and his job just prior to Dolce was refilling nuclear submarines.

"I lived with Canadian guys and we all brewed beer," Allen said of the nuclear sub job.

Why did you hire him to be a winemaker, I asked Maguire.

"Gil made him," Allen said.

"Gil believed in scientists," Maguire said. "Sometimes you have to look at somebody who has ability more than experience. We joke that Gil was the only winemaker who could say winemaking isn't rocket science. His degree was in rocket engineering."

Nickel, who died in 2003, actually made his money in his family's Oklahoma wholesale plant nursery, the second-largest in the country. His first expensive hobby was racing vintage cars, and in 1995 he won the European Historic Sports Car Championship. He didn't taste his first glass of wine until he turned 30, but he was quickly all-in.

In 1979, he bought the stone shell of the Far Niente winery in Oakville that had been abandoned since the beginning of Prohibition. He also bought a share of the 100-acre Martin Stelling Vineyard and would eventually own the whole property. The vineyard is right on the other side of a line of eucalyptus trees from Martha's Vineyard, which had already been made famous by Heitz Wine Cellars.

By the way, just as the Far Niente team is certain that it's making better wine today than first-growth Bordeaux, they feel that way about Heitz Martha's Vineyard Cabernet as well. I mentioned that I had been working



© Far Niente | Gil Nickel bought the abandoned winery in 1979.

on another story about the greatest wines ever made in Napa Valley, and some people had talked about the famous '74 Heitz Martha's Vineyard Cabernet. The Far Niente team was dismissive.

"I think there's a fine line between minty and herbal," Maguire says. "I think that herbal notes (in the Heitz wine) is from farming. The degree of ripeness we're picking at now is very different than it was in 1974."

"We're growing different grapes now. We just are," vineyard manager Aaron Fishleder said. "They're different rootstocks, they're different clones. We've learned a lot since then."

And much of it stems from that 2001 tasting. The winery didn't just decide overnight to start picking two weeks later – well, it kind of did, but there was more to it than that.

"We didn't want to do too much too quickly," Maguire said. "There were decisions we had to make with pumpovers. How do you treat grapes picked at 26.5 brix? Do you treat them the same way as grapes picked at 23.5? We picked in different lots and processed them individually. But it was that moment when we tasted all those wines in 2001 when we could say, this is not a fad. It's the real deal. We don't want to follow fads. We're making longterm winemaking decisions."

It's interesting to look at Robert Parker's ratings to try to tease out the idea of ageworthiness, especially after the 2001 tasting. He was never a big fan of Far Niente Cabernet prior to 2001, even hanging a 77 rating on the 1986 Cabernet. The 2001 Cabernet he gave 92 points, his then-highest score for Far Niente. This started a string of seven 90+ scores from Parker, but he never went gaga on release: until 2014, his highest on-release score for a Far Niente wine was 93 for the 2007.

Then he started tasting the older wines. In 2012, he gave the 2002 Far Niente Cabernet a 94. And in June of this year, he gave the 2005 Far Niente Cabernet a 96, writing, "Its full body, beautiful texture, seamless integration of all its component parts, and stunning ripeness make for a profound Far Niente that is aging magnificently and seems far superior to what I remember in its youthfulness. (Shame on me.)" I tasted that '05 Cabernet at the winery and have to agree with Parker: it's fruit-driven but not simple, with good freshness.

I can also attest that some Far Niente fans hold their wines for years. While waiting to interview the winemaking team, I sat in the lobby near the receptionist, who took more than one call from somebody on the mailing list



asking which vintage she thought was drinking best presently. Should one open the '94 this week, or the '96? The receptionist likes the '96.

"One cannot talk about Far Niente winery without mentioning Dolce, the ultimate dessert wine," says Eduardo Dingler, corporate beverage director for Morimoto restaurants. "It has such layers and finesse that includes honey, lime and lemon zest tones, rich texture and stone fruits."

Dolce might be California's greatest sweet wine, but it also came about because Far Niente doesn't like to kneel before any winery.

"We would have dinners here in the great hall," Maguire said. "At the end of the meal, we'd serve them Quinta do Noval or Château d'Yquem. You'd hear them walking out the door and they'd be saying, 'Oh man, that d'Yquem was incredible.' We thought it would be nice if they were still talking about our wine."



© Far Niente | Far Niente's Martin Stelling vineyard borders some of Napa's most famous vineyards.

Far Niente starting making a little unlabeled sweet wine just to serve at dinners. It was a hit, so by 1992 they were selling it commercially and had replanted some of their Coombsville vineyards to Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc to make it. They just use those grapes for Dolce, unlike in Bordeaux, where dry wines are also made from them.

"We're friends with the family that makes Château Haut-Brion," Maguire said. "The winemaker interned here. You might think, 'Why can't we make that here?' We've experimented with that. It's a wine we could sell commercially for \$35 a bottle. But that's not what we want to do."

Maybe then they'd have to admit that the Bordelais could do something better? Nah, never happen.