
FAR NIENTE: AN INTIMATE EXPERIENCE

By: Bryce Wiatrak



I have always been drawn to Far Niente — it looks like a fairy cottage on a hill with its greenish oxidized copper accents, lushly planted window boxes and surrounding azalea gardens. The building was constructed in 1885 by Hamden McIntyre, the architect who built the Christian Brothers Winery, now home to the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone. Far Niente’s founder, John Benson, a ship captain from Boston, first came to California for the Gold Rush. The winery initially produced Muscat, and the original label, on display today, was designed by Benson’s nephew, Winslow Homer. Prohibition shut down the winery for sixty years, until Beth and Gil Nickel bought it in 1979. Today, the property remains in the family’s hands.

Far Niente makes two wines, a Chardonnay and a Cabernet Sauvignon. They sell each as young wines, but also hold back vintages on-site for their late-released “Cave Collection.” The wines are wonderful in all their forms — the Chardonnays rich and palate-coating without feeling overdone. The Cabernet feels more old-school, a mid-weight wine with a quiet dusty tannic backbone and kirsch and rose aromatics. But perhaps the tasting’s greatest treasure comes at the end in the form of “liquid gold” from sister label Dolce. The title not only alludes to the wine’s dessert status, but also completes the Italian expression from which the parent winery’s name is drawn — “il dolce far niente” or “the sweetness of doing nothing.” Among California’s best sweet wines, Dolce is made in the model of Sauternes, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon affected by botrytis or “noble rot” — a fungus that shrivels berries and concentrates sugar. It’s a difficult wine to make, both in the vineyard and the cellar, and a walk through Far Niente’s caves to the gated Dolce chamber reveals just how small the production truly is.

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A visit to Far Niente is always very personal — either private or in a small group and led by an engaging, knowledgeable guide. Guests can choose to tour the expansive caves or just proceed to the seated tasting in a luxurious tasting room. The flight includes selections from Far Niente, Dolce, as well as their Pinot label EnRoute. The wines are expertly paired with cheeses — and the finale of Dolce alongside Bleu d’Auvergne is utterly transcendent.

WHAT TO TRY: Since the Far Niente portfolio is rather limited in scope, you’ll leave with a good sense of what they do. In terms of the Chardonnays, I lean toward the aged Cave Collection, which adds further nuance to the wine with nutty, apricot aromas. And I can’t emphasize enough how good Dolce can be. Flavors of yellow apple skin, pineapple, mango and peach are complicated by notes of lanolin and petrol, oozing from every hedonistic drop.

INSIDE INFO: The Nickels own yet another sister label, Nickel & Nickel, whose wines are poured at its own winery, just a five-minute drive away. Nickel & Nickel focuses on single vineyard wines, and the profile leans toward more richness and firmer structure. Apparently Nickel & Nickel and Far Niente enjoy separate, but devoted, followings. Try both for yourself to discover your Cabernet style preferences.