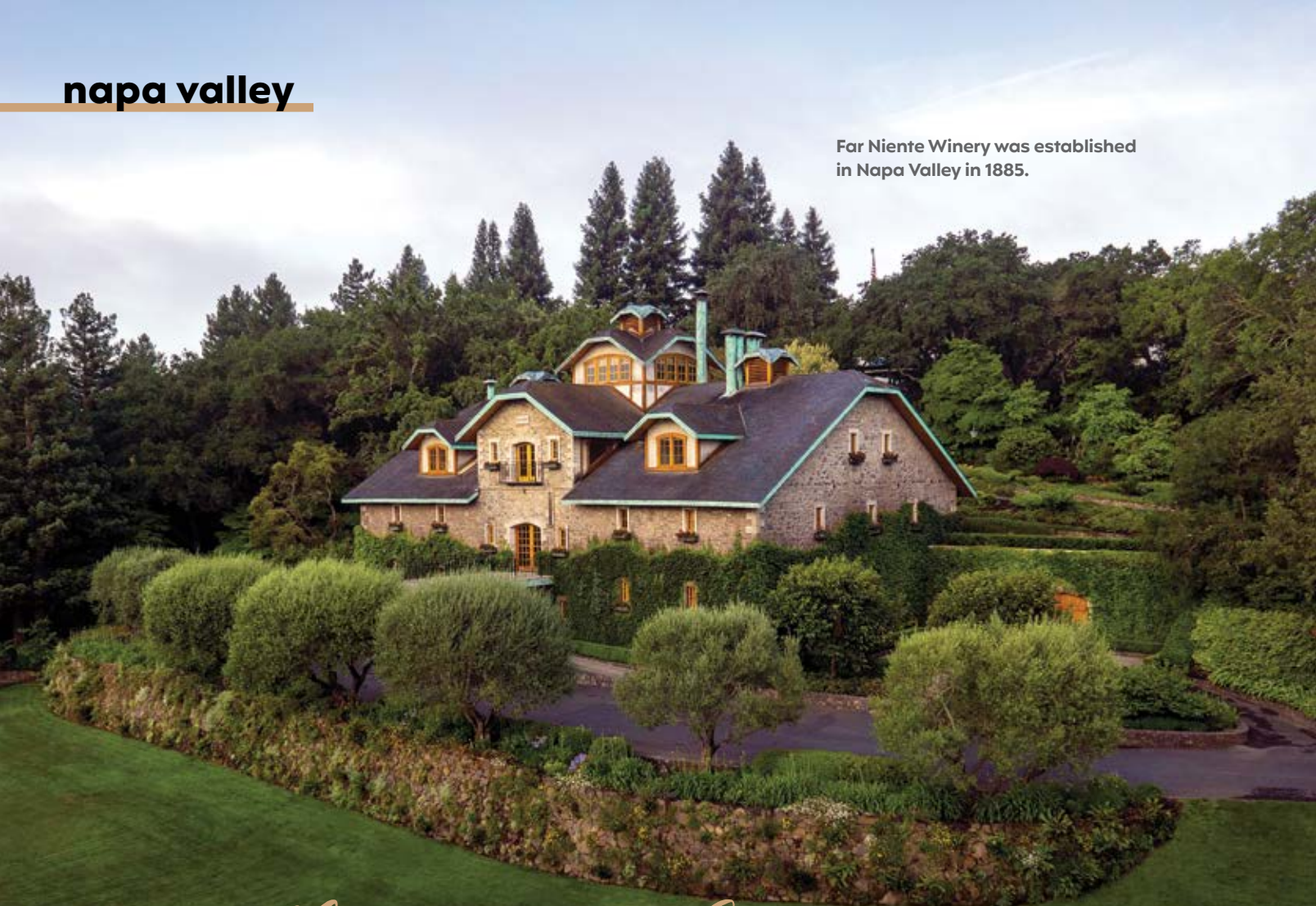


Far Niente Winery was established in Napa Valley in 1885.



*following the*  
**CABERNET  
BLOODLINE**

**IN CONVERSATION WITH THE WINEMAKERS OF  
FAR NIENTE WINE ESTATES**

by **Liz Thach, MW**

Imagine arriving in Napa Valley in the 1880s, when only a handful of wineries had been established and the valley floor was still filled with wild grasses and fruit orchards. That is what John Benson discovered when he arrived and founded Far Niente (meaning “without a care”) in 1885.

The winery flourished until Prohibition, when it was forced to close its doors. However, the estate was brought back to life by Gil and Beth Nickel after they purchased the property in 1979 and restored the historic winery and vineyards. Their first Cabernet Sauvignon was released in 1982, and since that time the celebrated estate has become famous for its expressions of the variety, along with Chardonnay and its decadently sweet late-harvest wine, Dolce.

“Our estate Cabernet

PHOTO COURTESY OF FAR NIENTE

Sauvignon vineyard, called the Martin Stelling Vineyard for the estate owner in the 1940s, was replanted in the early 1980s and is just behind the winery,” says Far Niente winemaker Nicole Marchesi. “Our location in the Oakville AVA is ideal, because we have alluvial soil flowing down from the Mayacamas Mountains and we are neighbors with some equally famous vineyards.” Indeed, Far Niente is in the heart of Napa Valley’s Oakville AVA, right next to the renowned To Kalon Vineyard. Its closest neighbors are Robert Mondavi, Opus One, BOND, and Cardinale, among others.

Meanwhile, even those familiar with the winery may be unaware that Far Niente Wine Estates has established three sister wineries, all with a focus on extending its Cabernet Sauvignon legacy in Napa Valley: Nickel & Nickel, Bella Union, and Post & Beam. Each is run as a separate entity with a dedicated winemaking team.

Recently, I was able to visit with Marchesi and the winemakers from each sister property while tasting through the 2021 vintage of their respective Cabernet Sauvignons. The experience was eye-opening, because even though each winery has a different style and price point—Far Niente ranges from \$155 to \$300, Nickel & Nickel averages \$145, Bella Union averages \$85, and Post & Beam ranges from \$50 to \$60—they are clearly linked, their bloodline defined by texture and elegance.

Another way that the four wineries express their shared bloodline is through the beautifully distinctive labels that adorn the bottles. The original Far Niente label was designed in 1979, when the Nickels commissioned stained-glass artist Tom Rodrigues to create a label that melded the Old World with a touch of modernity. Rodrigues drew upon the work of famous artists Louis Comfort Tiffany and Alphonse Mucha to forge a design depicting twining grape leaves and clusters in an Art Nouveau style that’s reflected in all four labels today.



## A NAPA VALLEY CLASSIC WITH FAR NIENTE WINEMAKER NICOLE MARCHESI

A graduate of the enology program at the University of California, Davis, Nicole Marchesi arrived at Far Niente in 2005 and worked her way up to the position of head winemaker. “Our Cabernet Sauvignon winemaking philosophy here centers around texture [and] structure,” she explained. “At Far Niente, we are trying to showcase power with elegance so that the wine fills your mouth with multilayered fruit and texture, along with great structure and a refreshing acidity on the finish.”

She has achieved just that in Far Niente’s 2021 Cabernets from Oakville and Napa Valley. The grapes for the former are primarily sourced from the aforementioned Martin Stelling Vineyard, while the latter is sourced from multiple vineyards between Calistoga and Oak Knoll, with the backbone of the wine also hailing from Oakville. “It’s like putting a puzzle together,” Marchesi said. “Each vineyard represents a different piece, with some providing more structure, others offering different fruit characteristics, some offering texture—it is exciting to explore and bring them together in one wine, creating our signature style every vintage.”

### Far Niente winemaker Nicole Marchesi.

Indeed, Marchesi is getting ready to release a special wine that could be described as a puzzle within a puzzle, made as it is from the best blocks within the Martin Stelling Vineyard; it’s being produced in collaboration with Thomas Rivers Brown, a consulting winemaker in Napa Valley known for producing multiple 100-point wines for his clients.

When asked about her favorite aspect of winemaking, Marchesi replied, “I love the teamwork and logistics, especially as we approach harvest. The adrenaline is high, and we need to constantly adapt and shift based on the vintage. It is exciting and fun!”



**Nickel & Nickel winemaker Joe Harden.**

## A SINGLE-VINEYARD FOCUS WITH NICKEL & NICKEL WINEMAKER JOE HARDEN

“Here at Nickel & Nickel, we are all about single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon,” noted winemaker Joe Harden. “We have a purist approach and are one of the very few wineries in Napa Valley that are 100% Cab and 100% single vineyard.”

Nickel & Nickel was established in 1997 by Gil and Beth Nickel, who realized over the course of their years in Napa Valley that there were many special vineyards that deserved to be showcased on their own. Today the winery produces wines from 20 different properties, each expressing the notable differences and complexities of its respective terroir.

In terms of winemaking philosophy, Harden said, “In the beginning we used the same winemaking techniques for the different vineyards, but now we adjust the winemaking to match what each vineyard is expressing. For example, some of our mountain vineyards are more structured, so they may need less extraction and oak, whereas a valley-floor vineyard in Rutherford may offer softer tannins. They are all quite distinctive, so our winemaking is adjusted to match each vineyard.”

Harden is also a UC Davis enology graduate but spent several years as a professional basketball player before transitioning to the wine world. It is perhaps due to this experience that he likens winemaking to athletics: “We bring a team of people together who each have different roles, but we are all working toward the same goal. There is lots of hard work and long hours, but we are working together to take our best shot for the vintage,” he said.



**Bella Union winemaker Brooke Bobyak Price.**

## ALL ABOUT THE BLEND WITH BELLA UNION WINEMAKER BROOKE BOBYAK PRICE

Unlike at Nickel & Nickel, the Nickels decided to elevate the craft of blending to an artform when they purchased a Cabernet vineyard on Bella Oaks Lane and established Bella Union in 2012. Their approach is based on the Bordeaux model, in which each vintage may be composed of different percentages of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and other approved varieties to create a “beautiful union”—hence the brand’s name. “Our flagship Cabernet blend is mainly sourced from our DeCarle vineyard in Rutherford,” said winemaker Brooke Bobyak Price, noting that it also contains Malbec, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot from other Napa Valley vineyards.

Also trained at UC Davis, Bobyak Price worked in winemaking positions at HALL, Jordan, and Stags’ Leap before arriving at Bella Union in 2018. She is excited about the fact that the winery will open a new tasting room on Highway 29 in the summer of 2024; the space will occupy the old Provenance winery, which Far Niente Wine Estates purchased in 2022 and is renovating. As a result of the acquisition, Far Niente Wine Estates will be the only company to own three wineries on the prestigious route.

Bobyak Price’s favorite part of winemaking is the creativity required to assemble a blend. “I’m a very tactile person and I enjoy being outdoors in the vineyards, where I begin to create the blend . . . and [craft] a special product to share with family and friends that comes from nature,” she said.



Post & Beam winemaker Michael Accurso.

## APPROACHABLE ELEGANCE WITH POST & BEAM WINEMAKER MICHAEL ACCURSO

Post & Beam, named after the ancient style of construction often used for barns, launched in 2020 and is the newest addition to Far Niente Wine Estates' portfolio. The Cabernet Sauvignon grapes are sourced from Napa Valley vineyards carefully selected to deliver a fruit-forward yet elegant wine style that can be consumed within one to five years of release. "My team and I were trying many wines at home, and we decided to develop something more affordable and approachable for our consumer," said winemaker Michael Accurso. "Post & Beam still has the pedigree of Napa Valley and Far Niente, but we are flipping the script so it is approachable enough to drink now."

The wine spends 16 months in French oak, with a portion aged in roughly 30% new barrels and the remainder in once-used and neutral French oak barrels with a looser grain to allow for quicker tannin integration and approachability at an earlier age. "We focus on sourcing from vineyards that have a red-fruit emphasis and silkier tannins," Accurso said, adding that the wine is produced partly with the on-premise market in mind: "Since it has a more approachable style, it is very food friendly, and a lot of restaurant owners are really happy to be able to offer a Far Niente Wine Estates wine at this price point."

Accurso, who earned degrees from California Polytechnic State University in agriculture and wine, says his favorite part of winemaking is "being in the vineyards and sharing in the camaraderie with the crew. It's dirty work with long hours and some sleepless nights, but we make sure that people have fun as well. Music during crush, along with some beer and tacos at the end the day, really helps," he said with a grin. **T**

## TASTING NOTES

All four Far Niente Wine Estates winemakers were excited about the 2021 vintage, which has also been praised by wine critics. "It was a drought year so the grapes were smaller and more concentrated, allowing us to create intense and structured wines that will age well," said Joe Harden.

"2021 was a celebratory vintage and one of my favorites," added Nicole Marchesi, "because we lost most of the 2020 vintage due to the wildfires."



**Post & Beam 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$55)** Aged 16 months in French oak, this Cab exudes aromas of black raspberry that lead to a regal dusting of cherrywood on the palate. As plum intertwines with white pepper, a juiciness emerges, elegantly folding into a satin finish of blueberry, cinnamon, nutmeg, and sandalwood. **95** —*Meridith May*

### **Bella Union 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$80)**

Fresh and exciting, with ripe black cherry forming a creamy base. Teeth-gripping, tongue-coating tannins soon relax and reveal peppered plum, sweet tobacco, and a range of backing spices. Delicious, with an abundance of heart, it finishes with a saturation of cedar and mocha on the palate. **95** —*M.M.*



**Nickel & Nickel 2021 C.C. Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley (\$145)** Sturdy and broad-shouldered, this is an intense expression of dusted dark chocolate, blackberry, and peppercorn. The taste of chiseled rock is apparent, as are black cherry and sandalwood seasoned with exotic spices. Opulence settles in on the extended finish. **95** —*M.M.*



### **Nickel & Nickel 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, John C. Sullenger Vineyard, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$145)**

Planted on 30 acres of clay loam soil, this property is the home vineyard for Nickel & Nickel. Brilliant red-fruit aromas lead to a glorious entry of dried violets, dark chocolate, and a field of boysenberry. Sleek tannins impart a streamlined texture, and notes of roasted coffee, black cherry, and cherry pith surround an earthy middle before continuing through the juicy finish. **98** —*M.M.*



**Nickel & Nickel 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Bear Track Vineyard, Napa Valley (\$145)** An unrestricted dynamo with hold-on-to-me tannins. Plush plum and dusted violets meet in a maelstrom of crushed stone, soy sauce, and fennel. Given time, this statuesque gem will mature to acquire even more depth. **94** —*M.M.*

### **Far Niente 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$155)**

Black cherry and cedar make a dramatic entry into a statuesque frame with a cashmere texture. The gobby black-raspberry middle combines with savory notes of fennel and Worcestershire. This is a true classic. **97** —*M.M.*

### **Far Niente 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley (\$300)**

Taut, dusty tannins and crushed rock slowly introduce a parade of powerful and lush flavors: roasted coffee, cherry, oak, and black olive. White pepper permeates the exuberant texture, slowly unleashing a wash of blackberry over slate. The palate is possessed by the wine's grip: austere and mighty. **99** —*M.M.*