



## Cabernet Cult

**NAPA VALLEY'S FORGOTTEN CLASSICS STILL MAKE OUTSTANDING ACQUISITIONS**  
 By Bruce Schoenfeld

Not far away from the Groths, at Bistro Don Giovanni on Highway 29, there had been another tasting earlier in the day, another table groaning with bottles of dark, deep California Cabernet. Presiding was Gil Nickel of Far Niente, which has made one of the finest Cabernets in America for 15 years. But these weren't Far Niente wines.

Nickel has invented a 3,000-case winery called Nickel & Nickel that stands apart from his traditional California winery, but benefits from the association. The wines show the wisdom of the idea. At least three of the four 1997 Nickel & Nickel Cabernets (there's also a Merlot and a Zinfandel) taste like a hybrid of a wine like Harlan Estate and Far Niente, offering ready drinkability but also plenty of structure. Because each came from a single vineyard, they show the personality of a specific place.

Cult wines didn't just help pay for these small-batch, single-vineyard releases. "The whole craze for cult wines has done the missionary work for us," Nickel acknowledges. "We can fill a niche now instead

of having to create one. Without them, we'd be plowing new ground."

Like the cults, these new Cabernets—designated Stelling, Rock Cairn, John C. Sullenger and Carpenter after their vineyards—are all made in small quantities. And they're expensive: as much as \$95 a bottle for the Stelling, the best of the four. But that's less than half the \$225 for a new release of Harlan Estate, and about the same as Far Niente.

Nickel made his money in the nursery business in Oklahoma. In 1979, he bought a disused winery in Oakville and retrofitted it with up-to-date equipment. He started making Chardonnay, and the Cabernet started to get attention with the formidable 1985 vintage. "We didn't know about cult wines when we started, though in hindsight we were one," he says. "Until we started growing a little larger, we had a cult following. It has been a challenge to keep riding the wave. I thought I got here too late in 1979, and now people act like I was a pioneer."

Today, Far Niente produces 35,000 to 40,000 cases a year of a wine modeled after Bordeaux's Haut Brion. It was one of the first wineries to seek not to produce a flawless wine but a consistent wine, in the Bordeaux style. Like Haut Brion, which tends to taste like a Haut Brion in all but the quirkiest vintages, Nickel wants his wines to taste like themselves. Tell him you picked out Far Niente in a blind tasting and you'll make his day.

By comparison, the Nickel & Nickel wines will be whatever the land makes them. "The last thing we want," Nickel says, "is Far Niente Jr."

"I need to make a wine that is special, that's not only a good wine but shows the characteristics unique to individual vineyard sites," says winemaker Darice Spinelli, who works only for Nickel & Nickel. "With Far Niente, they have the opportunity to fill in the holes with blending. With single-vineyard, we realize that there will be strengths and weaknesses. Each wine will reflect the characteristics of a given year."

Nickel ultimately hopes to create wines as profound as Far Niente with all the Nickel & Nickel releases, though he realizes that's a tall order for any cult wine, even his own. "But you have to have a long-term plan in the wine business, generally lasting beyond your lifetime; it's kind of like building the pyramids," he says. Toward that end, he has made his college-age son a partner, and already expanded the range of single vineyard sources for coming Nickel & Nickel releases.

For now, though, when he seeks a representation of what a complex, ever-evolving classic California Cabernet should taste like, he opens a bottle of his Far Niente. "We try to be the real thing here, in this modern world where everything tends to be phony," he says. He's referring at once to his business philosophy and his winery, but above all to his wine. And then he drinks it. ♦

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