

Far Niente to bring glamor and great wine to Detroit

By Sandra Silfven / The Detroit News

The rest of the story

More about Far Niente and its sister wineries:

At this year's Masters Tournament at Augusta, Ga., Tiger Woods chose Far Niente cabernet and chardonnay to pour at the Champions dinner, where it's the tradition for the previous year's winner to play host.

Far Niente is good at letting customers purchase older vintages. Its special Cave Collection consists of up to 10 past vintages of cabernet sauvignon and five past vintages of chardonnay.

Partner Gil Nickel is also known for his vintage car racing and car collection. The "car barn" on the Napa property is not open to the public, but you might be able to arrange a visit. Only don't call it the car barn. It's been renamed the carriage house.

According to Maguire, Dolce was "invented" when the three partners tired of people leaving special wine dinners raving about the d'Yquem that finished off the meal, not the cabernet.

The property for Nickel & Nickel is opposite the Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville, just past Opus One. It's a 42-acre site with an old farmhouse that is a landmark along Highway 29. The land was purchased for \$100,000 an acre in March of 1998. "In 2001, we had people tell us we could resell it for \$250,000 an acre," Maguire said.

The room was set with so many glasses of cabernet sauvignon it was like walking into a cloud of cassis and blueberries. One might hesitate to use the word "intoxicating," but it was, in the most sensuous way.

That's what it was like when Larry Maguire, president of Far Niente in Napa Valley, entertained Metro Detroit retailers and restaurateurs recently at the Townsend Hotel in Birmingham. Maguire will serve as honorary chair of the Detroit International Wine Auction on Oct. 19, a benefit for Detroit's Center for Creative Studies.

In what was perhaps a preview of some wines that will tempt buyers at the auction, Maguire brought six consecutive vintages of Napa Valley's Far Niente cabernet sauvignon, which starts at \$115 a bottle, and six single-vineyard cabs from Nickel & Nickel, the new Far Niente offshoot, priced at an average of \$90 each.

Throw in a vertical of six consecutive vintages of Dolce (\$92 a half bottle), produced by the only winery in the United States that only makes this one honeyed beauty (it also belongs to the Far Niente group), and you can understand why this recent sunny afternoon was one of those life experiences you want to catalogue in your memory forever.

So what do six vintages of Far Niente cabernet taste like? Think big, inviting giants -- concentrated, well-knit. From the unreleased '99 vintage, which will need a rake for all the critics' points it will probably earn, to the mellow 1997 and the still lustrous (and favorite of many tasters) '95, the quality was as easy to recognize as a Jag or Lexus running at top speed down the interstate.

The Nickel & Nickel line is the new venture by Gil Nickel and partners Larry Maguire and Dirk Hampson. While the Far Niente cab is a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc, the Nickel & Nickel wines are 100 percent cabernet, intentionally made that way to show the influence a growing site can have on the wine. Which explains why the foggy, cooler Carpenter Vineyard, located east of the city of Napa, makes a wine less fruit-driven than the Dragonfly Vineyard in the hot end of the valley, north of St. Helena.

But why create not only a separate label but a separate winery for the single-vineyard Nickel & Nickel cabs instead of rolling them into the Far Niente brand? "We love the concept of single-vineyard wine," Maguire said, "but we didn't want to change the concept of Far Niente."

Far Niente, you see, has only made two wines since inception -- the high-end blended cabernet and a high-end chardonnay.

Dolce is a separate winery, too, devoted to the production of one sweet dessert wine made mostly from semillon grapes with a small dollop of sauvignon blanc. The grapes develop botrytis, a form of rot that happens late in the growing season. It concentrates the juice of the grapes into a nectar-like liquid. Botrytised grapes are used to make the most expensive sweet dessert wine in the world -- the Sauternes of Chateau d'Yquem.

The opportunity to taste six vintages of Dolce clearly impressed guests -- rarely did anybody spit it out, like they did the cabs. They swallowed it like children enjoying candy.

The newest vintage -- the 1998 -- which had the most sauvignon blanc of any in the vertical tasting (24 percent), was showing like a true star -- sensuously silken in the mouth, honeyed but not cloying. And to the surprise of many, it was poured from regular 750 ml bottles, not the half bottles most consumers know. And yes, the lettering and twisted vine on

the bottle are real gold.

Not only did Maguire bring a treasure trove of wines to show, but also the whole gang from the winery except Gil Nickel. He introduced partner Dirk Hampson and the winemakers -- Stephanie Putnam, who makes the Far Niente line and worked 10 years at Hess Collection; Darice Spinelli, who oversees the Nickel & Nickel cabs and formerly worked at Beaulieu Vineyard and Franciscan Estates; and Greg Allen, who makes Dolce.

Allen is an engineer from M.I.T. who worked as a harvest intern at Far Niente and fell in love with winemaking. "It got rocky when I told my parents I was going to devote my life to alcohol," he said.

Far Niente has long been a good friend of the Detroit International Wine Auction, with Gil Nickel serving as honorary chair in 1984. Maguire was the marketing chief at that time and recalls Nickel's unusual donation -- a "piano case" of chardonnays -- a container built like a piano box that was dramatically transported to the auction site by helicopter. That donation brought a winning bid of \$7,000.

Far Niente presented a fine show on that auction night 18 years ago, and you can bet they will outdo themselves again this fall.