

Wine & Spirits

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT WINE

TOP 100 WINERIES OF 2015 UNITED STATES

We taste a lot of great wine at *Wine & Spirits*. And among all the top-performing bottles, some names appear more often than others. These 38 US wineries repeatedly rose to the top, garnering at least three strong recommendations in our blind tastings over the past 12 months. Some are names you'll readily recognize, like Diamond Creek, Frog's Leap or Roederer Estate. Others are relative newcomers to the top 100, like Chapter 24, Sheldrake Point or Twomey. All are producing wines that stand among the very best in their region, be it Napa Valley or the Eola-Amity Hills, Walla Walla or New York's Finger Lakes.

For our Top 100 Wineries, we do not consider the great producers that make fewer than three wines a year; you'll find some of their bottles in our 100 Best Wines (page 100). Instead, we're looking for consistency across a range of bottlings. In the following pages, Joshua Greene and Luke Sykora cover California, and Patrick J. Comiskey addresses New York, Oregon and Washington State, profiling the US contingent of our *Top 100 Wineries of the Year*.

Nickel & Nickel

With fifteen single-vineyard cabernet sauvignons, Nickel & Nickel offers a window into the distinct terroirs of Napa Valley.

From Far Niente: Gil Nickel and his family developed Far Niente around the Martin Stelling Vineyard in western Oakville; their winemaker, Dirk Hampson, helped launch the Nickel & Nickel winery with the abundant 1997 vintage. The following year, the Nickels bought the Sullenger Vineyard, on the east side of Highway 29 in Oakville, with the plan to build a winery for the new brand. Darice Spinelli, who had been winemaker at Mt. Veeder and joined the Nickel & Nickel team in 1998, recalls the first vintage at Sullenger, when she made a blend of sauvignon blanc and semillon from the property. "It was a fantastic bottle and we brought it in front of Gil," she says. "He said, 'Well, how is this distinctive? Is it the blend, or is it the vineyard?'" Spinelli and Hampson decided that to set the brand apart they would focus on 100 percent varietal wines — chardonnay, merlot and, mainly, cabernet sauvignon.

Across the Valley: Spinelli has partnered with growers in every appellation of the Napa Valley, all monitored by Vinescape, the in-house vineyard management company. She invites each of the growers to discuss the plan for the upcoming vintage and to taste all the separate lots from the previous harvest. Even so, their top 2012 in our tastings this year came from their home vineyard, at Sullenger.

Alluvial Fans: The 30 acres of cabernet at Sullenger grow at the far edge of an alluvial fan that forms at the Mayacamas benchlands to the west. The clay-loam soils here produced a 2012 with textural finesse in the tannins, though the flavors of those tannins are not polished away, emerging as scents of fresh forest mushrooms to accompany the equally fresh plum, pomegranate and rose hip scents of the fruit. Spinelli also made a smooth, red-fruited and rose-scented cabernet from her two acres at Martin Stelling, Far Niente's home ranch. Made from See clone cabernet sauvignon planted in 1993, it's a fascinating contrast with Sullenger. —J.G.



Darice Spinelli

Winemaker: Darice Spinelli
Viticulturist: Aaron Fishleder
Owners: The Far Niente partners
Founded: 1997
Acres owned: 247 (by FN partners)
Cases produced: 30,000
Estate grown: N/A
Location: Oakville, CA
Website: nickelandnickel.com

TOP-SCORING WINES

- 94 '12 Oakville John C. Sullenger Vyd. Cabernet
- 92 '12 Oakville Martin Stelling Vyd. Cabernet
- 92 '12 Yountville State Ranch Cabernet