

DAILY DISH

THE INSIDE SCOOP ON FOOD IN LOS ANGELES

Far Niente takes a new route

by Patrick Comiskey

Far Niente is an iconic Napa Valley winery that can't seem to sit still. Recently, it announced that it would be debuting a new wine – a Pinot Noir, for which it has jumped the Mayacamas Mountains over to the next county. The new wine is called En Route, and it comes from the Russian River Valley.

En Route is the company's fourth winery: the flagship, Far Niente, was founded in 1982 by Gil Nickel, an Oklahoman who in his home state built the nation's second-largest family-owned nursery company, before turning to wine in the 1980s. In the Napa Valley, he found an old winery, Far Niente, and resurrected its name and its 19th-century edifice in Oakville. Ten years later, Nickel founded Dolce, a winery devoted to the production of a single dessert wine. Eight years after that, he founded Nickel & Nickel to focus on single vineyard wines. Nickel succumbed to cancer in 2003; his family maintains his legacy, and Dirk Hampson, Far Niente's longtime winemaker, now manages the estates.

As the flagship, Far Niente has always been known as a craft house, keen on fashioning fruit for an enduring, consistent, lasting house style. They became synonymous with Chardonnay, and their Cabernet – lush, well-structured, lavishly oaked – was an instant Napa classic. Between that and Dolce, the gold standard of Napa stickies, there seemed to be plenty of laurels to rest on. But in the course of producing Napa wines, Nickel got more and more enthralled with single vineyard expression, which led to the formation of Nickel & Nickel, for which a separate winery was built in St. Helena. Nickel & Nickel produces no less than 10 single vineyard wines, some of which venture beyond the Napa Valley, particularly for Syrah and Pinot Noir.



That, then, is the route that led to En Route, which will make only Pinot Noir. The 2007 wine, called “Les Pommiers,” is drawn largely from a vineyard in the Russian River called Manzana, once an apple orchard and replanted by the Dutton family, famous growers of apples and grapes. Another vineyard, Amber Ridge, will also contribute significantly to future blends; the aim here, according to Hampson, is to create a Pinot version of Far Niente: a crafted wine, with a house style that supersedes single vineyard expression. Andrew Delos makes the wine.

Nevertheless, the 2007 is sleekly definitive of the Russian River, with scents of cherry blossom and a bit of forest floor, flavors drawing elements of red cherry and lavender together seamlessly, with a mild Amaro-like bitterness in the finish. It will be released in late summer, with a suggested retail price of \$50.