
WINES & VINES

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Far Niente Takes the Western Route

New EnRoute label taps Russian River Valley Pinot Noir

by Paul Franson



Russian River Valley, Calif.--Far Niente Winery is the latest prominent Napa Valley brand to travel over the mountains and establish a Pinot Noir winery in cooler climates.

It created EnRoute in the Russian River Valley to produce Pinot Noir from one of the most acclaimed regions for the variety in America. The effort complements its three wineries in Napa Valley, Far Niente, Nickel & Nickel and Dolce, which produce primarily Chardonnay, Cabernet and dessert wine.

Earlier, Joseph Phelps Vineyards of Napa Valley created Freestone Vineyards in Russian River Valley, and Napa's Duckhorn developed Goldeneye in Anderson Valley with similar goals.

A new wine to be released in September is called Les Pommiers, in homage to the apple orchards that once filled the area. The 2007 is the initial release. It is a blend from vineyards primarily in Green Valley and the upper Middle Reach area of the Russian River Valley AVA.

Though the venture is new for Far Niente, making Pinot Noir isn't. The company says the name, EnRoute, reflects the journey the partners have taken on their way to producing Pinot Noir.

The partners are Beth Nickel, Erik Nickel, Jeremy Nickel, Dirk Hampson and Larry



Maguire, who jointly own EnRoute and its sister wineries in Napa Valley.

Director of winemaking Dirk Hampson says that Far Niente produced Pinot from Winery Lake Vineyard in Carneros and from Edna Valley grapes from 1986 to 1998, when it stopped production to focus on Chardonnay and Bordeaux red varietals.

Hampson had earlier made Pinot Noir at Chateau Chevalier, also in an effort with the late Gil Nickel. “We’ve always been fans of Pinot Noir,” says Hampson, who apprenticed at Labouré-Roi in Nuits-St. Georges in Burgundy and admits that his favorite wine is the 1955 Chambertin--at least until now.

Nickel & Nickel, the partners’ venture that focuses on single-vineyard wines, also made Pinot Noir from Russian River and Sonoma Coast from 2003 to 2007. In some senses, this wine was the predecessor of the new brand, for it was sourced from some of the same vineyards. But EnRoute’s Les Pommiers also reflects the style of Far Niente, which focuses on blended wines rather than single vineyards like Nickel & Nickel.

Hampson acknowledges that other areas also produce excellent Pinot Noir, but his group chose the Russian River Valley partly because of its grape flavors, track record and acceptance in the market.

The initial 2007 EnRoute Les Pommiers Pinot Noir was made largely with purchased grapes, but the company has purchased two vineyards and expects an increasing percentage of the fruit to come from these vineyards as they mature.

The Graton Vineyard is a 21.5-acre abandoned apple orchard just west of Graton on a cool, sloping site just 10 miles from the Pacific Ocean. It lies in the Green Valley AVA. It is planted with double-Guyot trellising to Pinot clones Pommard 5, Mt. Eden, Swan, 2A and Dijon clones 115 and 777 on 101-14 rootstock with 4 x 7-foot spacing. In the area’s sandy loam Goldridge soils comprised of weathered sandstone and granite, with a fine, almost powder-like topsoil, the vineyard yields bright fruit character.

The partnership subsequently purchased the celebrated Amber Ridge Vineyard in the upper Middle Reach area of the northern Russian River Valley. Located on rolling terrain off Starr Road in Windsor, 22 of its acres were planted to Pinot Noir in 2000 on bilateral vertical trellising. The clonal mix includes Pommard 5, Calera and Dijon clones 115, 667 and 777 using 101-14 rootstock to limit vigor. The Huichica soil series in the vineyard consist of moderately well drained loam with clay sub-soils, mixed sedimentary rock and volcanic ash. Amber Ridge Vineyard produces a medley of ripe, dark fruit, earthy cherry and wild berry.

The partners have also bought grapes from the Manzana Vineyard in Green Valley since it was planted in 2001. Eight acres of the east-facing hillside vineyard, planted to Pinot Noir Dijon clones 114, 115 and Pommard 5, contribute to the Les Pommiers blend.

The winemaker for EnRoute is Andrew Delos, who spent three years as the assistant winemaker

at Nickel & Nickel. He previously was the assistant winemaker at Pellegrini Family Winery, where he worked with Olivet Lane Vineyard, a source of notable Russian River Pinot Noir, and gained exposure to other Russian River wines at the winery's custom-crush operation. He is a graduate of the University of California, Davis, wine program. Hampson will oversee the winemaking.

Grapes were harvested on Sept. 7 and 11 and Oct. 1, 2007 after a mild year. The winery picks at a moderate--for today--24 to 24.5° Brix. The EnRoute wines were crushed, fermented and barrel aged at a Dutton facility in Sebastopol. They had 11 days of skin contact and were aged for nine months in French oak barrels, 60% new, 40% once used.

The 2008 harvest was down 30% due to frost, and it was also a warmer year, particularly at harvest.

Though the current EnRoute release is a blend, Hampson allows that the future could hold single-vineyard Pinots like the single-vineyard wines produced at Nickel & Nickel. He also hints that the venture might eventually build its own winery, as Phelps and Duckhorn have done with their Pinot ventures.

2007 EnRoute "Les Pommiers" will be released in September 2009 at a nationally suggested retail price of \$50. Hampson admits that the winery had an eye to the economy when they chose the price. "It can list for under \$100 on wine lists," he says.

Approximately 1,275 9-liter cases were produced. Find more information at enroutewinery.com, or contact the winery at (707) 944-2412 or pinot@enroutewinery.com. The company continues to make a Russian River Chardonnay under the Nickel & Nickel brand.