

# Napa Valley Register

## Steady wins the race: Far Niente celebrates 40 years of Chardonnay

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In its debut, the Far Niente 1979 Chardonnay label created quite a stir. For some, it was a garish design. To boot, it was framed in real gold foil. Yet the early Far Niente team had a vision, one that it has not wavered from since.

Earlier this month, Far Niente co-founder Beth Nickel joined Dirk Hampson, chairman, and director of winemaking emeritus; Nicole Marchesi, winemaker at Far Niente; and Larry Maguire, president emeritus and vice chairman, as panelists in front of a virtual media audience in a celebratory tasting of four vintages of Far Niente Chardonnay to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the wine.

Ray Isle, Food & Wine magazine editor, moderated the event. The Chardonnay discussions were flavored with stories from the winery's early days.

The Far Niente label was designed with greatness in mind. The Chardonnay, along with their Cabernet Sauvignon, was going to be some of the finest wines in the world. The thought was: people may not know the Far Niente name yet, and it may not be easy to pronounce, yet they would not forget the label. Upon its debut, the label made the cover of Wine Enthusiast Magazine.

To Dirk Hampson, who has been with the winery since the early 1980s, the label was not just visually inspiring, but it also included a textural element, one that made people want to touch it.

And the texture is what the Far Niente Chardonnay is all about. From its inception, the wine's core identity was texture and richness without sacrificing acidity, and the winery has not veered from this philosophy in the 40 years since.

To retain its acidity, the Far Niente Chardonnay does not go through malolactic conversion, which would soften the acids and provide an overall perception of more weight and less acidity. Instead, winemaker Nicole Marchesi explained that a bit of skin contact adds a textural component to the wines. Small changes have been made over the years, such as the extent of skin contact, but the core style remains the same.

The Chardonnay has always been barrel fermented which helps meld the fruit and oak flavors at an early stage, ensuring a fine balance between the two groups of flavors. At the time the Far Niente Chardonnay was

first released, there were very few if any, other barrel-fermented Chards being created. To give historical weight to this point, it was also a time when aging on the lees — something often done to add richness to white wines today — was deemed 'radical' and 'dangerous', explained Dirk.

Beth Nickel dotted the discussions with further historical recollections, noting that in 1979, when she and her late husband Gil entered into the wine business, there were fewer than 100 bonded wineries in the Napa Valley, with "no fabulous resorts, restaurants or traffic jams." The Nickels thought that they were one of the last to get into this "new wine craze." Little did they know, this was only one of the growth waves to expand the Napa Valley wine scene.

Forty years later, in a much different Napa Valley, the Far Niente Chardonnay label is part of the winery's strong brand identity, explained several of the panelists. You would easily recognize the label from across a wine shop, even when lined up with twenty other Chardonnay bottles.

With all this talk about the wines themselves, what can you expect in the glass when tasting the last four vintages of Far Niente Chardonnay?

**The 2019 Estate Bottled Chardonnay** has bright red apple and pear fruit with lemon curd and hints of toast and cinnamon which stay vibrant through the long finish by the wine's fresh acidity.

**The 2018 Estate Bottled Chardonnay's** enticing toasty-ness is met with lemon peel, fresh red apples, and pear with a lemon crème richness. On the finish, there is a touch of baked apple with spice, and the bright acidity keep things refreshing.

**The 2017 Cave Collection Chardonnay** has toasty, nutty, marzipan, red apple, and pear compote, along with cooked lemon aromas, which meld into buttery-crust-cooked-red-apple-and-spice goodness on the palate; the richness upstaging acidity a bit in this vintage.

**The 2016 Cave Collection Chardonnay** is a whirl of nutty, toasty, marzipan, cooked red apple and Asian pear fruit with a touch of lemon curd, honey and spice adding further intrigue to this very complex Chardonnay. The round mid-palate is kept fresh with (still) vibrant acidity.

