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Far Niente launches En Route, a new brand devoted to pinot

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It's taken the folks at Far Niente nearly three decades to get their pinot noir just right.

Considering the fastidious bent of the partnership — never taking the easy way out — it's no surprise that the launch of a brand devoted solely to the single varietal comes 30 years after the late Gil Nickel brought his hallmark chardonnay to the market.

Coming onto restaurant wine lists and retail shelves just in time for summer is EnRoute pinot noir, a Russian River designated wine made from fruit harvested in vineyards near Graton and Windsor in 2007. It's a pinot worthy of its Burgundian heritage and certainly the \$50 price tag.

But getting to this point in the marketing of a first class pinot has proven to be an uphill journey. This long and winding road to pinot noir vantage ground begins in the early days of Far Niente in the late '70s when Gil Nickel decided to breathe new life into an abandoned winery just south of the Oakville Grade. Gil and Beth Nickel had the good sense to bring on board a couple of savvy guys, Dirk Hampson and Larry Maguire, to help get the project off the ground.

While Maguire maintains his marketing expertise is based on seat-of-the-pants, on-the-job strategies, Hampson had experience in Burgundy, Bordeaux and Germany and took to the role of winemaker with an enthusiasm befitting a young man with hands stained in Europe. While the main focus at Far Niente was development of a house style (a radical idea at the time) for chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, another project soon required the team's attention.

Gil invited his brother, John, to help him restore the luster of the Chateau Chevalier winemaking venture on Spring Mountain. In fact, that effort turned out to be Hampson's first



attempt at making pinot noir in the valley. While a Chateau Chevalier pinot was produced and offered to limited markets, the Nickel brothers decided Chateau Chevalier “was not part of their future,” Hampson said earlier in the week during a media rollout for the newest venture.

A second attempt at pinot noir came in the mid-1980s when Hampson blended fruit from Carneros and Edna Valley for a low key Far Niente pinot noir. “We made a pinot from 1986 through 1988 but only marketed the 1986,” Hampson said.

“The goal at Far Niente was to make one fantastic house-styled chardonnay and one outstanding house-styled cabernet sauvignon — so we decided to stick to those two things.”

Well, the team did get a little sidetracked in 1989 when it launched — as a separate entity — a Sauternes-styled dessert wine called Dolce.

Then, with nephew Erik Nickel on board and son Jeremy primed to join the fold, Gil Nickel launched Nickel & Nickel in 1997, a project devoted to championing single-vineyard wines.

“We started looking around for pinot noir that would float our boat,” Hampson said, in addition to the numerous outstanding Napa Valley cabernets the new winery brought to the attention of consumers.

That search for pinot noir that would point up “the personality of the vineyard” took the Far Niente team to the Russian River appellation. Nickel & Nickel would produce pinot noirs from both Russian River and Sonoma Coast from 2003 through 2006. Those wines were made in limited quantities and sold only at the winery and a few restaurants.

By 2007, Far Niente had not made wine only from the Russian River appellation, the partnership invested in the region by purchasing several outstanding vineyard tracts, one in the Green Valley AVA, and another on rolling hillsides off Starr Road in the Russian River AVA.

“We liked the flavors of the wines from these sites, the region has a track record and we felt we could continue making a house-styled (pinot noir) wine by blending fruit from different sites,” Hampson said.

“The fruit from the vineyard near Windsor provides (the wine’s) backbone, gives it its juicy quality — the fruit from Green Valley provides austerity, length and perfume.”

Explaining the choice of name for the brand, Hampson noted that “Gil, Larry and I spent a lot of time in Burgundy, traveling along Route N74. We thought about using (the route name) at one point. During one of our discussions, Larry commented, ‘We’ve been en route for some time.’ And that was it.

“We have been on this path for a long time and we felt the name will have meaning for people. As for other things along that route, it’s interesting to note that in our careers we’ve (finally) become a nation of wine drinkers.”

EnRoute winemaker Andrew Delos has been making pinot noir in the Russian River Valley and Sonoma County for most of his career. The UC Davis grad was enologist at MacRostie Winery, and assistant winemaker at Pellegrini Family Vineyards, where he worked with the Olivet Lane project. For the past five years, he has been assistant winemaker at Nickel & Nickel. Now, he’s the only employee in the cellar space leased from another bonded wine producer in the

Russian River AVA.

Serving as president of EnRoute is East Coast native Bruce Mooers. A 25-year wine industry veteran who has sold wines from all over Europe and Northern California, Mooers is a specialist in the ultra-premium market. He has been with the Far Niente family of wineries since 2002 when he was named director of sales for Nickel & Nickel. Later, Mooers added sister wineries Far Niente and Dolce to his responsibilities. He was named vice president of sales for the companies in 2007 and was appointed president of EnRoute in 2008.

In information developed for the launch of the new brand, Beth, Erik and Jeremy Nickel, along with Dirk Hampson and Larry Maguire, note that they've covered a lot of ground since the first pinots made in the '80s.

"We have driven back roads amongst vineyards all over Europe, California and Oregon. We have had steely-eyed conversations in obscure countryside restaurants about our personal and business futures. We have enjoyed amazing wines in great winery cellars and in the homes of some of the world's greatest vintners. Our years together have always been about learning, challenging and realizing our greatest goals. We are hopeful that will continue for many years to come. After all, where are you headed if you're not en route to fulfilling your dreams?"

A stunning wine

As the fruit for this new wine comes from land once home to countless apple orchards, the wine is called "Les Pommiers." Total production is 1,275 cases for the inaugural release, with approximately 2,000 cases expected for the 2008 release. The initial release is a blend of fruit from three vineyard sites planted on a variety of clones in sandy loam soils.

Over lunch the other day, we got to taste the inaugural release and a barrel sample of the 2008 vintage:

EnRoute 2007 Russian River Valley Les Pommiers Pinot Noir (\$50): A soft, sweet pinot with earthy notes, ripe red cherries play off the mid-palate, and raspberries follow on the elegant finish. Silky tannins accent the finesse of this outstanding wine.

EnRoute 2008 Russian River Valley Les Pommiers Pinot Noir (n/a): Displaying the hallmarks of a riper vintage, there's a bit more structure in this wine. It's juicier, with oodles of black cherries filling the mouth and lingering lovingly on the palate. It's a lot more expressive — a pinot for all occasions and a wider variety of food. Expect the company to keep the \$50 price for this vintage.