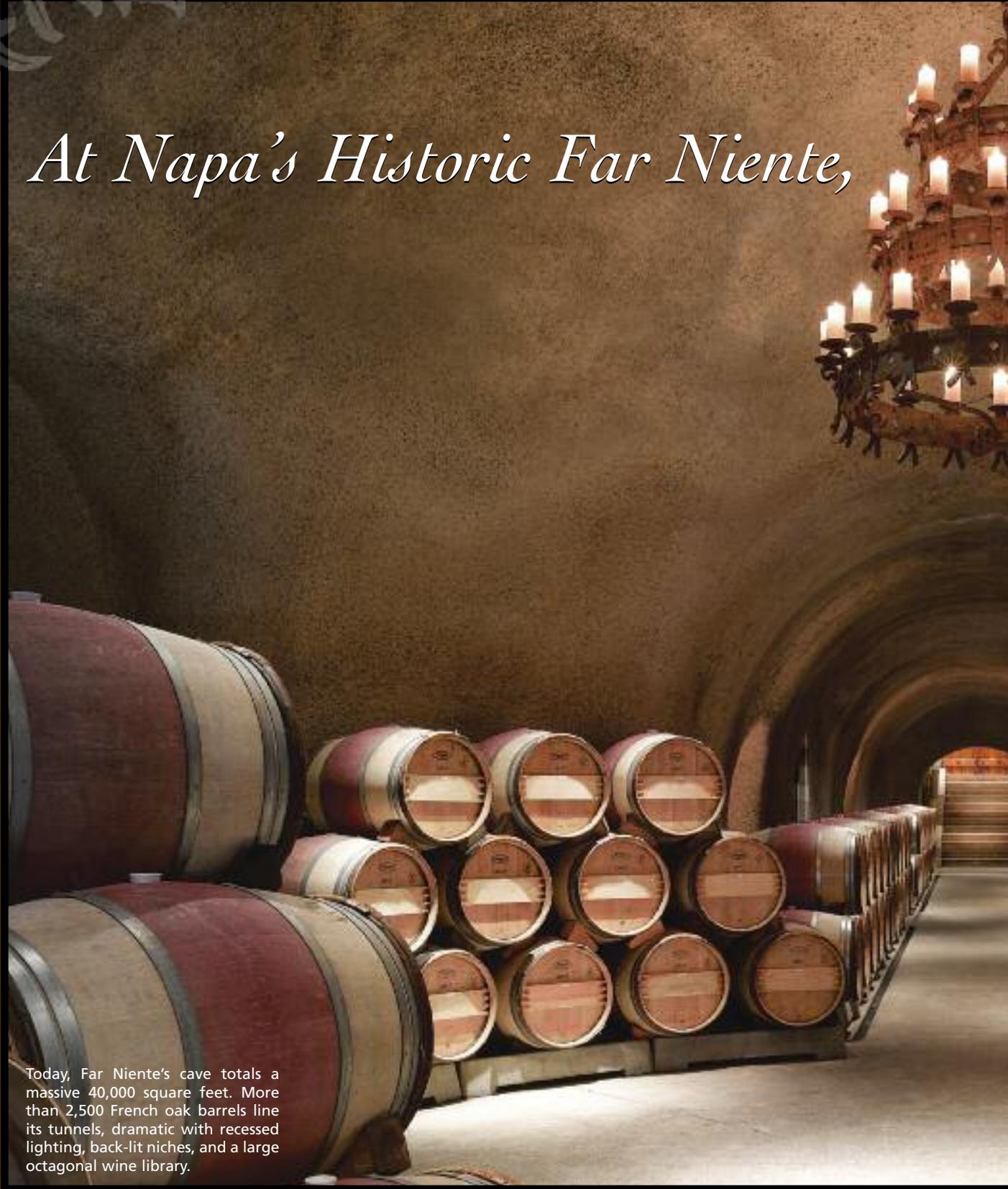
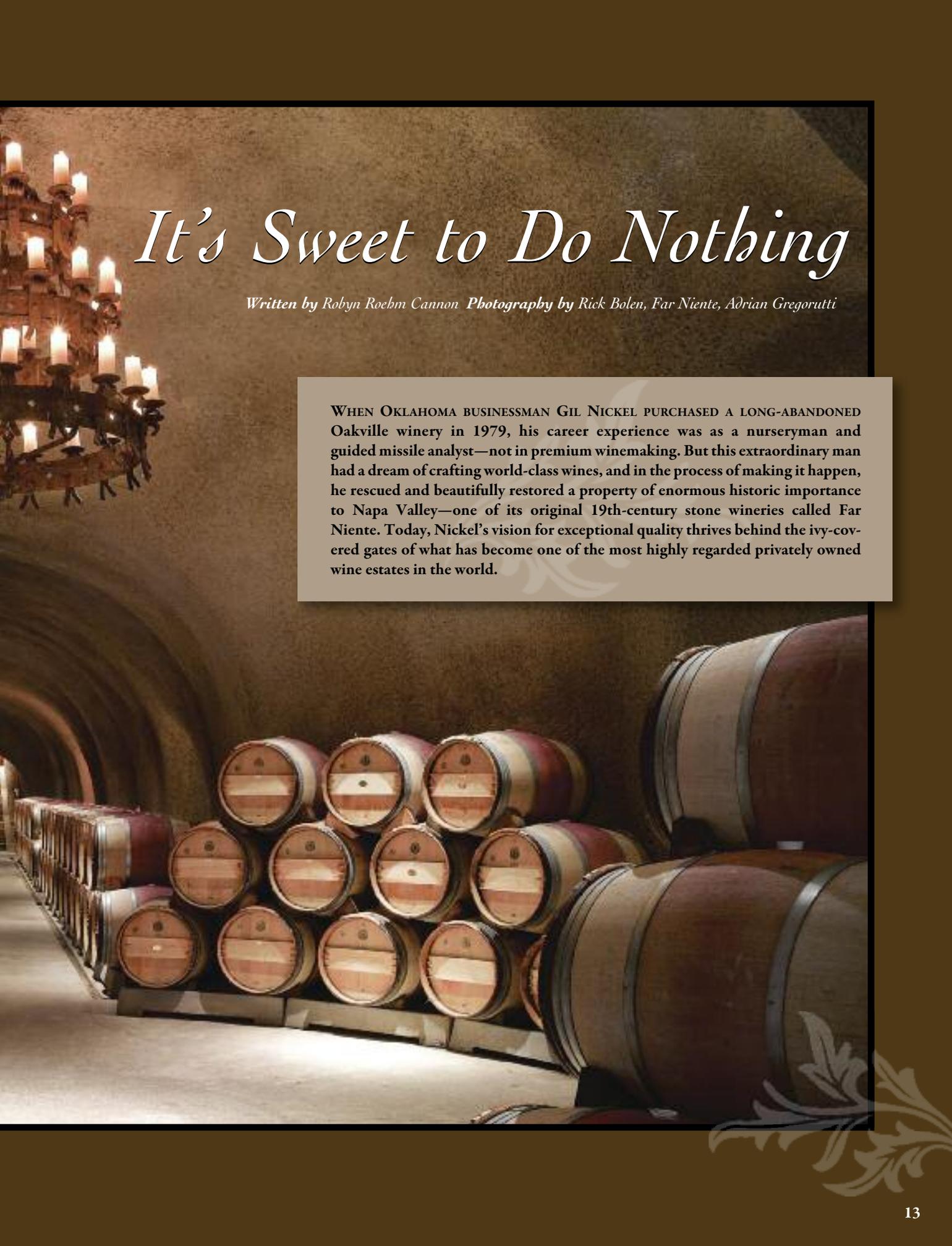




At Napa's Historic Far Niente,



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A photograph of a wine cellar. In the foreground, several large wooden barrels are stacked on a wooden pallet. The background shows a long, arched tunnel of smaller barrels receding into the distance. A large, ornate chandelier with many lit candles hangs from the ceiling on the left side. The walls are made of stone or brick, and the lighting is warm and focused on the barrels.

It's Sweet to Do Nothing

Written by Robyn Roehm Cannon Photography by Rick Bolen, Far Niente, Adrian Gregorutti

WHEN OKLAHOMA BUSINESSMAN GIL NICKEL PURCHASED A LONG-ABANDONED Oakville winery in 1979, his career experience was as a nurseryman and guided missile analyst—not in premium winemaking. But this extraordinary man had a dream of crafting world-class wines, and in the process of making it happen, he rescued and beautifully restored a property of enormous historic importance to Napa Valley—one of its original 19th-century stone wineries called Far Niente. Today, Nickel's vision for exceptional quality thrives behind the ivy-covered gates of what has become one of the most highly regarded privately owned wine estates in the world.

During its first 25 years, Far Niente was admired by many, but accessed by few. Only members of the wine trade were invited, until recently when the property was opened to the public for tours and tastings by appointment. Although still renowned as one of Napa's most exclusive destinations, it is certainly also one of the most gracious.

Guests entering Far Niente's estate through its lush, perfectly manicured 13-acre garden are welcomed as warmly as a member of the Nickel family and invited to enjoy far more than the winery's ultra-premium Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. But to fully appreciate this luxury estate, it's important to reflect on its history.

John Benson, a forty-niner during the California gold rush and uncle of the famous American Impressionist Winslow Homer, founded Far Niente in 1885. He commissioned architect Hamden McIntyre, who designed the former Christian Brothers Winery (now the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone), to design the fieldstone building. It was constructed against a

winery buildings, Nickel placed a great deal of emphasis on the landscaping. Coming from a family in Oklahoma that still operates one of the largest commercial nurseries in the nation, he had the perfect background to transform the grounds with hundreds of specimen trees and shrubs.

More than 100 'Autumn Gold' ginkgo trees line the gently curved approach to the winery gates along Acacia Drive, allowing magnificent views of the Cabernet vineyards beyond. In early spring, as far as a mile away on Highway 29, visitors catch glimpses of 8,000 Southern Azaleas—the most extensive planting of the species on the West Coast—which carpet the estate in brilliant hues of red and pink. Groves of towering redwoods, dogwoods, and century-old corkscrew willows create an enclosed entry canopy, and at the end of a shaded drive through the Woodland Garden, the stately stone winery emerges like a jewel where it can be appreciated from every angle.

One of the most interesting features of the Far Niente tour is access to its extensive cave, which John Benson planned but never executed. Nickel took on the task beginning in 1980, and today, the cave totals a massive 40,000 square feet. More than 2,500 French oak barrels line its tunnels, dramatic with recessed lighting, back-lit niches, and a large octagonal wine library.

The cave balances perfect humidity and consistent temperature for gracefully aging the estate's precious vintages, which are expertly crafted by winemaker Stephanie Putnam. She

has been managing all aspects of the estate's Chardonnay and Cabernet harvest, blending, and production since coming to Far Niente in 2001 after a decade with Napa's Hess Collection winery.

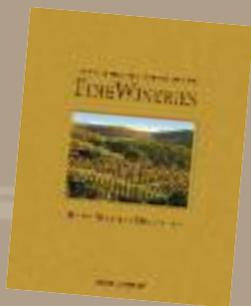
A brief stop in the Carriage House allows guests a fascinating close-up view of the Nickel family's classic automobiles and vintage race cars. Highlights of the 16-car collection include a 1951 Ferrari 340 America, a 1971 Ferrari Daytona, a 1958 Porsche Speedster, and a rarely seen 1961 Chevrolet Corvette Convertible.

Having satisfied the interests of gardeners and car aficionados, the final and most anticipated stop is the Great Hall to taste Putnam's critically acclaimed wines, elegantly served with seasonal cheeses in a private salon.

"Doing things of great quality with honesty and integrity is extremely important to us," offers Larry Maguire, partner and president of Far Niente. "The best way to experience our culture at Far Niente is around the

Far Niente is among 60 prestigious wineries featured in *The California Directory of Fine Wineries, Third Edition* (Ten Speed Press, \$19.95). This bestselling hardcover guide is widely available at Borders Book Stores, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com.

Photograph 2008 by Robert Holmes; Courtesy of The California Directory of Fine Wineries, Third Edition.

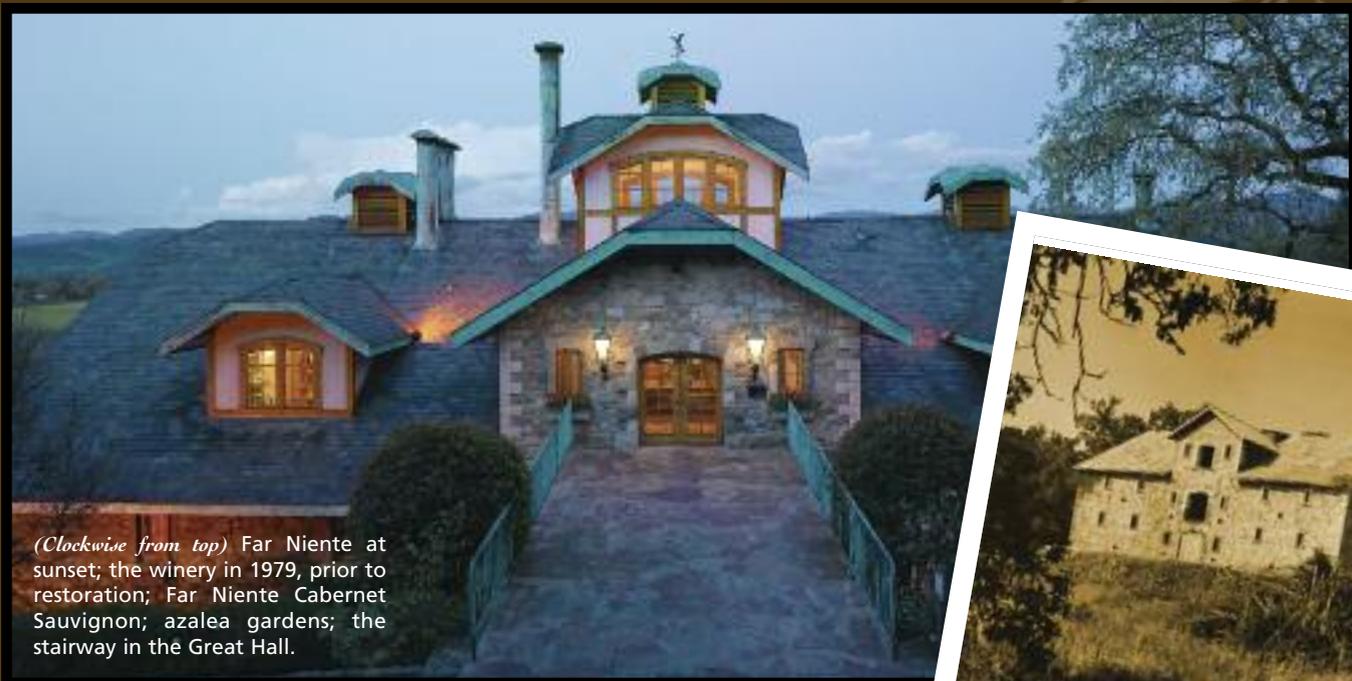


hillside in western Oakville, where it thrived for more than three decades as one of the first gravity-flow wineries in California.

Benson must have been a romantic at heart. In naming the estate, he chose Far Niente, romantically translated from Italian to mean *without a care*, which no doubt describes the early years of the winery on the beautiful site. But that carefree era ended with the onset of Prohibition in 1919. After Benson's death, the property was abandoned and sat in disrepair for the next 60 years.

In 1979, Nickel and his wife, Beth, purchased the dilapidated winery and committed to an intense three-year restoration, an effort that was ultimately rewarded with a prestigious designation on the National Register of Historic Places. Benson's original sentiment, the words Far Niente—hand-carved into the stone on the front of the building—was carefully preserved.

In addition to meticulous restoration of the main



(Clockwise from top) Far Niente at sunset; the winery in 1979, prior to restoration; Far Niente Cabernet Sauvignon; azalea gardens; the stairway in the Great Hall.



table. It promotes great conversation among our guests, rather than a presentation or lecture about our wines.

“We recognized long ago that we are playing in the luxury wine market and decided to focus all our energies on the highest level of quality—no secondary labels,” continues Maguire, admitting that it was a bold move when Nickel made that choice.

He recalls the day in 1980 when the winery offered its first estate Chardonnay at \$18.00 a bottle. “It had people swearing at us for being so arrogant as to charge that much!” laughs Maguire. “But today, there’s a whole industry that climbed on the shoulders of what Gil had the confidence to do. We’ve worked very hard to craft his vision

and translate it into the bottle. Now other small vineyards are exuding that same confidence.

“In the wine business, we grow diamonds and bottle art. But we don’t believe in success at any cost,” he continues. “Far Niente will not grow appreciably over the next decade, but instead, we’ll concentrate our efforts on producing even better wines.”

A perfect ending to this memorable tasting experience is a glass of Dolce, a sumptuous, honey-colored late harvest wine that has achieved near cult status among Far Niente fans. *Dolce Far Niente* translates *sweet to do nothing*. But in Maguire’s estimation, “It’s not so much the doing nothing—it’s the style with which you do nothing!” **ISI**