

Robb Report

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California Cults

An elite group of Napa Valley vintners has made winemaking history in decades, not centuries.

BY ANDREA ROBINSON

FOR CENTURIES, France has been the undisputed standard bearer in the world of fine wine. But, in less than a generation, America's so-called "cult" wines have more or less balanced the critical scale between legendary Bordeaux and relative upstart Napa Valley. A multitude of variables have contributed to this shift, but the two constants in the equation have been the enthusiasm of connoisseurs and critics, and the realities of the vineyard.

High prices have been the most visible result of the first of these factors. At \$175 to \$300 per bottle, Screaming Eagle, Colgin, Harlan Estate, Grace Family, Araujo, Dalla Valle, and Bryant Family largely have surpassed the cost of the benchmark French Bordeaux reds after which most of them are styled. But these numbers actually make sense when one considers the quantities produced by each of these labels—from a few hundred cases to at most 2,000 per vintage, which pales in comparison to the output of the top-ranked Bordeaux. (Château Lafite Rothschild, for example, produces about 25,000 cases per year.) What raises some eyebrows are the sums these wines fetch at auction. Since only the few hundred or so members on the wineries' mailing lists (most of which are closed to new customers) can buy them at winery prices, these wines instantly command a price two or three times

their initial amount in the secondary market. The \$300 bottle of Screaming Eagle instantly becomes a \$1,000 bottle—or more—and the buyer confronts the wrenching conundrum: "Can I afford to actually *drink* this stuff?"

While many of the vintners bemoan this outcome, since they produce their wine to be enjoyed, most of them (most notably Dick Grace of Grace Family) have turned this situation to their advantage by donating standard and large-format bottles to charity auctions, where prices really soar. The less philanthropically minded collectors who

buy these bottles acknowledge that part of the price premium comes from the sense of accomplishment they have in acquiring something so scarce. As someone for whom opening a cult is a rare and special occasion, I can attest that the "trophy" value of these wines does add to the thrill of drinking and sharing them with people whom you like or want to impress.



But the greatest impact of these wines may be the improvement of quality at every price point, as other winemakers worldwide try to emulate their success. Given the lengths to which cult winemakers go to achieve quality, establishing a viable contender is not easy. Attention to detail at every stage of production is incredibly exacting. In the vineyard, each individual vine is coddled like a

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what the French call terroir.*

Thoroughbred throughout the growing season, often by a sought-after vineyard expert like David Abreu (whose own wine, Abreu, pulls down critics' scores comparable to those of the labels whose vineyards he manages). As harvest approaches, excess clusters of grapes are cut from the vine to nurture a few perfect ones. At picking, the grapes are nestled into smaller-than-normal boxes, after which each berry is sorted. The wines go to "finishing school" in oak barrels from the finest French forests and coopers, and every step of the process is usually overseen by one of the "fab four" of consulting enologists: Heidi Peterson Barrett, Mia Klein, Philippe Melka, or Bordeaux's Michel Rolland.

Ann Colgin of Colgin Cellars aptly refers to this intensive application of science and craft as "extreme winemaking." American vintners are sometimes criticized for focusing too much on process (extreme or otherwise) instead of on distinctive vineyard sites; but neither Colgin nor any of her peers set out specifically to "create" an important wine using the best-of-the-best techniques. Rather, they sought to achieve the best expression of vineyards that have captured their hearts and imaginations.

American winemaking has always been about the land. Two of the greatest post-Prohibition California wines, Stag's Leap's S.L.V. Cabernet and Ridge's Montebello, are still based on the principle of great vineyard expression—what the French call *terroir*. But these wines did not influence the tide of California winemaking in the way the modern cults have, since they came to prominence in the late '60s and early '70s, when the industry was dominated by big manufacturing entities. Although the core American wine model still emphasizes brand building, the new cult wines have put the quality potential of California's premier vineyards permanently on the world wine map.

As a Master Sommelier whose palate was trained on the French Bordeaux and Burgundy benchmark wines, I was skeptical of these wines' ascension to prominence in the '90s. Were they so much better than the Bordeaux classics that inspired them? They certainly tasted better young, and in many cases, they *were* better. As Harlan Estate director Don Weaver points out, except for

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1990 itself, "Bordeaux had a much tougher go of it," in terms of vintage quality during the past decade, than did California.

But for me, it was not possible to assess one essential aspect of these wines that is intrinsic to the quality and collectibility of their Bordeaux counterparts: their ability to age. At the same time, some of these estates' comparatively old-guard neighbors—Opus One and Shafer Hillside Select, for instance—had reached the point of being able to muster 15-to-20-year verticals, and those wines were showing the sumptuous fruit I think of as Californian, as well as the dusty, earthy complexity that, for me, is quintessentially European. And recent tastings of decade-old Colgin, Harlan, Screaming Eagle, Dalla Valle Maya, and **Araujo reveal that these wines have reached a similar point, as they transition from the sexy seduction of youthful fruit and oak to the subtlety and substance of what might become the unique expression of their vineyards' terroir.**

Whether they continue to age as gracefully as the greatest Bordeaux over the next 30, 50, or 100 years is difficult to gauge. What is certain, **in my opinion, is that California's cult wines represent a unique blending of old-world trueness to place with new-world drive that has enabled them to prove the potential of their vineyards in decades,**

not centuries. While the owners of this select group of wineries cringe at the term "cult," which suggests a short-term fad rather than the long-term commitment to quality and tradition that defines Bordeaux's great châteaux, these American upstarts nevertheless have managed to inspire winemakers—and wine drinkers—the world over to rethink some of their assumptions about the quality of this most hedonistic collectible. ✨



ANATOMY OF A CULT WINE

BY
PATRICK COMISKEY

THE FIRST CULT WINE, presumably, was poured for the first wine cult—that of Bacchus, in Ancient Rome—and the wine (of unknown *cépage*, but certainly not a Cabernet) was crafted to inspire lunacy among the nymphs, maenads, and goat-hoofed satyrs in attendance. Wine was the vehicle for countless acts of antediluvian impropriety, sufficient to make the historian Livy blush: “When the wine had enflamed their minds, and the dark night and the intermingling of men and women, young and old, had smothered every feeling of modesty, depravities of ev-

ery kind began to take place...”

In modern times, the word *cult* was first applied to wine in a 2000 *Wine Spectator* article, and while few of the producers associated with the phenomenon are comfortable with the term, it is apt in many ways: A cult following by definition is irrational, obsessive, fueled by things other than reason. And this elite cadre of wines is so intensely coveted that men and women, their minds inflamed, do indeed go to all manner of extremes to obtain a precious bottle.

The transubstantiation of wine to cult wine begins with desire, which is typically catalyzed by a prominent critic’s granting the wine in question a score that approaches or achieves three digits. The pulses of collectors immediately quicken, their palms itch, salivary glands activate. It does not matter to them whether they have heard of the wine, whether it has a history, a track record, or a provenance; nor does it matter that, straight from the cellar, it commands stratospheric

prices, and that demand has conferred upon it instant rarity.

Collectors, in their excitement, sometimes overlook the fact that 300 cases or less of the wine may exist. In fact, they may hear rumors about the wine for years before ever encountering a bottle—and even then, it’s quite another thing to taste it. No matter. Such is the thrill of the chase.

Star Power and Star Makers
James Conaway, in his book *The Far Side of Eden*, notes that the rise of cult wines in the Napa Valley was heralded by three events: the arrival, in 1975, of Francis Ford Coppola to the Napa Valley, ushering in some unalloyed star power; next, the advent of the three-digit price tag, Diamond Creek’s \$100 Lake Vineyard Cabernet, in 1980; and finally, Gil Nickel’s purchase of the Sullenger property in Oakville in 1998, breaking the six-figure barrier for land at \$100,000 per acre. Yet this phenomenon would never have been conceivable without Joseph Phelps’ Insignia and without

Opus One, the famous collaborative bottling from Baron Philippe de Rothschild and Robert Mondavi. The 1976 Paris tastings might have been Napa's coming-out party, establishing the valley as a bastion of quality on a par with Bordeaux and Burgundy, but Opus and Insignia added an additional, essential attribute: status. These wines obliged the world to look upon Napa as *the* new-world source for wines of unparalleled luxury, prestige, and cachet.

Neither of these wines was scarce upon release, however, and for this reason, it is generally agreed that the first to have achieved the proper combination of quality, rarity, and expense was Grace Family, whose first vintage came in 1978. The price for this wine on its debut, \$25, seems almost quaint, but Dick Grace claims it was one of the most expensive Cabernets of the time. Even so, Grace's output was so small that its reputation remained underground until the late 1980s. It took Harlan Estate—a small-production, Bordeaux-style blend that emerged in 1984—to draw favor from the critical entity by which most boutique wines have since been measured, Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*. Parker tasted the 1992 Harlan Estate and gave it the lofty score of 96; three later vintages—1994, 1997, and 2001—each received perfect 100-point scores. Araujo, Bryant Family, Screaming Eagle, and Colgin Cellars received comparably magnanimous attention during this period, and these scores set off stampedes of demand among collectors and anointed Robert Parker as the de facto kingmaker for boutique wines—a role he continues to play to this day.

WHAT (AND WHO) MAKES A CULT WINE?

AT FIRST GLANCE, cult wines have



little in common with one another except perhaps their rarity and price. But, in fact, they share many common threads. Nearly all of them are Cabernet-based, often blended with some softer Bordeaux varietals, such as Merlot or Cabernet Franc, to ensure that they remain fairly supple upon release. Nearly all are from Napa Valley. Many follow similar vineyard practices, including densely spaced plantings, meticulous vineyard management, and a penchant for low yields and exceptionally ripe fruit. Interestingly, these vineyards also have in common an elite coterie of winemakers, consultants, and vineyard managers who play an important role in establishing and maintaining their mystique.

While having David Abreu lay out and manage one's vineyard, for instance, does not guarantee cult status, it does help—as it has aided Araujo, Bryant Family, Grace, and Colgin. If famed Bordeaux consultant Michel Rolland draws a breath anywhere near one's barrels, the demand for one's wine may skyrocket, as it has for Bryant Family, Araujo, and Harlan. Consulting winemaker Helen Turley's name has been synonymous with rare, delicious, and expensive bottlings, and her early involvement with

Bryant Family ensured its success. But Turley has plenty of company these days, including Heidi Peterson Barrett, who makes Screaming Eagle; Gary Galleron, who formerly made Grace Family; Mia Klein, who makes Dalla Valle's Maya; and Philippe Melka, who now makes Bryant Family. Each winemaker imparts his or her stamp on these and other, newer labels, but as a rule the wines share some pretty remarkable elements—luxuriant elegance, power and depth, and seamless poise and finesse.

For all of their similarities, each of these wineries has evolved its own distinct personality, reflecting the concerns and ambitions of its owners. Dick Grace has used his winery as a vehicle for outreach, to help the underprivileged.

Daphne and Bart Araujo consider themselves stewards of Eisele, the famous Cabernet vineyard they purchased, and have become proponents of organic and biodynamic farming in the process.

Ann Colgin and Screaming Eagle's Jean Phillips—arguably two of the most important women in Napa Valley—have parlayed backgrounds as an auctioneer and real estate broker, respectively, into extraordinary success. And Bill Harlan now plays a role in the cult wine fantasies of others with the Napa Valley Reserve, a private vineyard club whose members can participate in winemaking with a team assembled by Harlan Estate winemaker Bob Levy and vineyard manager Mary Hall.

This remarkable subset of Napa Valley's premium wine producers continues to set new standards of quality for the region and the world, and the many talented individuals involved in cultivating these labels will no doubt outlive the somewhat gaudy and unattractive moniker of "cult." Their wines certainly will. ✨