

Opinion **FT Magazine**

Jancis Robinson on the next generation of California winemakers

How vineyard owners in Napa and Sonoma are tackling the succession issue

JANCIS ROBINSON



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Towards the end of the last century, when the most prominent Napa Valley wine family, that of Robert Mondavi, was in turmoil, it was said that the region's big problem was succession. There had been very few smooth transitions of winery ownership from one generation to another.

But on my most recent visit to northern California last February I seemed to go from one harmonious bi-, even tri-, generational wine enterprise to another. Perhaps this is partly a reflection of the social status enjoyed by wine production in modern American society. And then there is planning.

The squire of Napa Valley today, having inherited the mantle from the late Mondavi, is without question Bill Harlan. He has systematically built [Harlan Estate](#) into a brand that effortlessly sells at double the price of a Bordeaux first growth, owns the luxurious social hub of the valley in [Meadowood](#), a bucolic Relais & Châteaux resort, and even has a business plan for the next 200 years.

His latest publicly announced venture is Promontory, a wine estate that has been delegated to his son Will, but he has been hiring prominent wine professionals at such a rate that there are doubtless more projects in the wings.

Just down the road in Rutherford is another father and son combo who toil at the earthier end of the spectrum. [John Williams](#) is in the process of handing over the organic pioneer wine estate Frog's Leap to his son Rory, who happily says: "I don't really make wine to make money."

Rory is thoroughly committed to his father's vines and the original ethos of the valley as a farming community. In 2007, they added the Rossi Estate to their initial holdings nearby. It was previously owned by "an old maid with a 52-acre property in Napa Valley — a popular date", as Rory describes Louise Rossi, who lived to 97 and filed with her lawyer a list of 20 people she did not want to have her land sold to.

Unlike many northern California wine producers, the Williams family have a permanent vineyard crew employed year-round. Rory echoed others' reports that vineyard labour costs have doubled in the past 10 years, partly fuelled by Trump-era immigration controls, but added: "[The wages are] still not enough."

He is aware of how fortunate wine producers in Napa and Sonoma are to benefit from the viticultural skills of the Mexican workforce; the Mexican vineyard manager at Frog's Leap has been with them 25 years. (Yet those organising an online seminar about northern California vineyard labour couldn't persuade a single worker to participate, so sensitive is the issue of documented vs undocumented immigrants.)

Another prominent father and son, Joel Peterson and Morgan Twain-Peterson, a Master of Wine, run their separate wine businesses out of the historic stone Hooker House just off Sonoma's leafy square. Joel almost single-handedly championed Zinfandel throughout the 1980s and 1990s and made his Ravenswood label such a success that in 2001 it was bought by the giant Constellation for \$148m.

Joel left Ravenswood last year to set up his own label, still specialising in old-vine Zinfandel, the cleverly named Once & Future. It's a much smaller operation than his son's Bedrock, which since 2007 has been scouting out some of California's rich heritage of old vines — some of which have been around for 140 years (Prohibition and lack of a market helped keep some of them in the ground) — to make a wide array of quirky wines. "Thirty years of telling people Zin isn't pink allowed me to sell bizarre varieties," Joel says today.

Morgan, a founder member of California's Historic Vineyard Society, is even keener than his father on the mixed, interplanted vine varieties called mixed blacks in California. "I like them because it recasts the conversation so that it's about the vineyard [not the variety]. There's much more emphasis on place now in California," he says.

He buys fruit for his 25 wines in eight counties but Bedrock farms about 60 per cent of its vineyards itself. He also tends to use larger oak barrels than Joel. His father describes his own winemaking technique as Burgundian.

The new squire of Napa Valley, Bill Harlan, has a business plan for the next 200 years

Before getting into wine, Joel Peterson worked in a hospital alongside Chris Bilbro, who also left to set up his own Sonoma winery. Bilbro founded Marietta Cellars in Dry Creek Valley in 1978. He died last year, leaving three winemaker sons: Jake, Scot and Sam.

Listening to this next generation, still apparently coming to terms with having no paternal oversight of their three separate wine enterprises, was like having a window on to a long-gone era of California wine. Dry Creek Valley was settled by Italian immigrants whose descendants formed a tight-knit community.

I was told how the men would all go mushroom foraging together and share crusty bread, salami and rough red on the bonnet of a truck. Chris, a dedicated Italophile, named his winery after his Italian great aunt Marietta, who would slap him when he tried to record recipes: "You don't write it down, you taste it."

Scot runs Marietta Cellars today, continuing the winery's brilliant red blend Old Vine Red, possibly California's best-value wine of any colour, a concept cooked up by Chris in the 1990s when blends were out of fashion.

Sam has his own operation, Idlewild, that specialises in Italian varietals, even though he has hardly been to Italy. And Jake Bilbro now owns Limerick Lane in Russian River Valley, an estate planted mainly with Zinfandel long ago. The next generation, Chris's grandchildren, are already making their own wine.

But by no means all next generation-ers are male. Jaime Araujo's parents established the widely admired, biodynamically run Araujo Estate so successfully that they were made an offer they couldn't refuse by François Pinault's wine group. Renamed Eisele Vineyard, it is now a sister operation to Ch Latour of Pauillac.

The Araujo parents have since set up from scratch once more, their new label being Accendo, made at their upmarket custom-crush facility Wheeler Farms. Meanwhile, their daughter Jaime has moved from Paris to Napa Valley to establish her own wine label, Trois Noix.

This difficult-to-pronounce-in-California name is yet another nod to succession: to the "three nuts" — her and her brothers' children.

Some favourite wines

All these are very much easier to find in the US than in the UK

- Accendo Cellars Sauvignon Blanc 2018 Napa Valley
- Accendo Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Napa Valley
- Bedrock, Evangelho Vineyard Heritage 2018 Contra Costa County
- Bedrock, Monte Rosso Vineyard Zinfandel 2018 Moon Mountain District
- Bedrock, Bedrock Heritage 2018 Sonoma Valley
- Bedrock, Old Hill Ranch Heritage 2018 Sonoma Valley
- Bedrock, Pagani Ranch Heritage 2018 Sonoma Valley
- Frog's Leap Zinfandel 2018 Napa Valley

£26 The Wine Society

- Limerick Lane, 1910 Block Zinfandel 2018 Russian River Valley
- Marietta Cellars, Old Vine Red (Lot 69) NV California

Lot 68 is £21 at Roberson

- Marietta Cellars, Angeli Zinfandel 2017 Alexander Valley

£37 Roberson

- Once & Future, Bedrock Vineyard Zinfandel 2018 Sonoma Valley
- Once & Future, Old Hill Ranch Zinfandel 2018 Sonoma Valley
- Once & Future, Oakley Road Vineyard Zinfandel 2017 Contra Costa County
- Tres Sabores, Perspective Zinfandel 2017 Rutherford

Jancis Robinson is hosting a tasting of new-wave California wine from 6.15pm on Saturday September 5 at this year's FT Weekend Digital Festival; ftweekendfestival.com

More stockists from Wine-searcher.com; Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com

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