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PROFILE

NAPA VALLEY'S GRANDE DAME

Robin Lail extends her family legacy with a winery of her own

By: Amber Gibson



“My passion for the wine business really started when I was 55,” announces Robin Daniel Lail, founder and owner of Lail Vineyards and a fourth-generation Napa Valley vintner. “Before that it was just something you do.” If you grew up on the sacred Inglenook estate, as Lail did, perhaps wine really does run through your veins. Lail’s lineage includes great-granduncle Gustave Niebaum and her father John Daniel Jr., who not only produced world-renowned cabernets at Inglenook, but was the first to list the ‘Napa Valley’ appellation on wine labels, creating international awareness for the region.

Before founding Lail Vineyards in 1995 with her husband and daughters, Lail worked as Robert Mondavi’s personal assistant, co-founded Dominus and Merryvale Vineyards and launched the first Auction Napa Valley in 1981. She was even the general manager at Meadowood Resort in the 1980s (“It was like a Motel 6 back then.”). Lail Vineyards doesn’t have a tasting room, so when Lail invites me to her Mole Hill home to taste her wines, I am honored by the rare opportunity. Lail Vineyards makes just five wines and all are critically acclaimed. The 2012 J. Daniel Cuvée received a perfect 100 point score from Robert Parker.

A pair of massive Bernese Mountain Dogs – Oracle and McKenna – greet me at Lail's front door. Their boundless energy and enthusiasm is reflected in the twinkle in Lail's eyes. She may be 77 years old, but she can still wrestle with her dogs and attend spin class several times a week. And run a winery.

A Lasting Legacy

"When my dad sold the wine business, I was only twenty-four," Lail says. She was prepared to move on with her life and try her hand at something outside of the wine business. "I knew I could not possibly recreate Inglenook in the space of one generation. I didn't have the money, the property or the equipment." But when she began working for Robert Mondavi, she found a mentor who would help her realize her passion for wine.

"Bob Mondavi was the world's most accomplished optimist," she says. "My time with him was fascinating and so educational. He gave me the tools to pick up the ball of my heritage and carry it into the 21st century." Lail Vineyards might not have the name recognition as Inglenook did and still does, but Lail is content with the quiet success of making great wine on a small scale.

What she's most proud of though, are her contributions over the years to the Napa Valley community. Lail helped found the volunteer center in 1974 and VanGo, a transportation system for seniors and the disabled. Perhaps her most well-known project, though, is Auction Napa Valley. "It took us two years to put the first auction together," she says. "We started planning it in 1979. The idea behind the auction was multi-fold, to raise money for local hospitals and charities, to promote the appellation of Napa Valley and to promote the importance of the vintner and community relationship." Over the years, it's been wildly successful at accomplishing all three of those goals



and inspired similar auctions across the country. "It's a great way to raise money," she claims. "It beats bake sales every time. And when you walk into the auction tent the excitement is palpable." This year's auction takes place the first weekend in June.

Partners for Life

"Robin is an icon in Napa Valley," rhapsodizes her winemaker Philippe Melka. "She's a very smart woman and she's been through so many eras but has a young mind." Melka has been working with Robin since the first harvest at Lail Vineyards in 1995. "She took a big risk," he says. "I was a new guy in town and she hired me to make



a batch of merlot from a Yountville block." It went well and the following year he was making all of her wine. In the early years, the J. Daniel Cuvée flagship had a strong merlot influence and 2001 was the first vintage that was 100 percent cabernet sauvignon, a trend that has continued ever since, an adjustment made to appeal to the consumer palate for high-end Napa Valley cabernets.

"Philippe is way more to me than just a brilliant winemaker," Lail reveals. "It's like a marriage. He is a humanist. He's loyal. He's a magician. For all the accolades he has received, his head size has never changed." As the list of wineries Melka consulted on grew, Lail admits that she grew nervous,



afraid he wouldn't be able to dedicate enough love and care to her wines any longer. But she needn't have worried.

"I've always been 100 percent behind her and her brand," Melka says. "She was always extremely supportive when I started my own brand and I make sure I'm there for her when she really needs me." His first year starting Melka Wines in 1996, he even received part of his consulting fee from Lail in wine. Today his clients include Vineyard 29, Corliss, Skipstone, and the new Alejandro Bulgheroni Estate.

The most exclusive and expensive

offering from Lail is the single-vineyard Mole Hill cabernet sauvignon from their Howell Mountain estate. I get a glimpse of these three hillside acres when I arrive on a wet, misty afternoon. Lail lives at Mole Hill beside her most treasured vines. Melka describes the 2014 vintage as large-shouldered with fine tannins and aromas of boysenberry and black raspberry.

All in the Family

My personal favorite wine is the Georgia sauvignon blanc, named after Lail's granddaughter. They started making the wine in 2002, a year after she was born. "It's so pleasing to say

that word – Georgia," Lail says. "It's rich and full in your mouth." Just like the structure in this Graves-style wine. I tasted the 2014 vintage, with citrus notes of oro blanco and lemon curd balanced with a creamy, brioche body from 18 months of aging in new French oak. The complexity in this Bordeaux-style white wine is far more interesting with a longer linger than the more common one-dimensional sauvignon blancs that many Americans are familiar with. "We were the first US producer in this style," Lail asserts. "I honestly think it's the best out there." This isn't a boastful statement, but a measured judgement from decades of experience.



“As you can imagine, I was the *best* mom for naming a wine after Georgia,” Lail says with a chuckle. Her grandson Henry won’t be so lucky though. “Henry would be a maximum \$20 bottle of wine,” she says. “Can you imagine if I were to pour you a bottle of Henry?” To be fair though, after Henry asked for his own bottle of wine when he was merely five, Lail began naming the one-of-a-kind sauvignon blanc lots sold at Premiere Napa Valley, a wine futures auction, after him. “We’re now up to Henry the Seventh.”

Only 300 cases of Georgia are produced, so it’s best to join the

Robin’s Nest wine club for first dibs. Under the Blueprint sub-brand, Lail also produces a sauvignon blanc and cabernet sauvignon that are a little more accessible and available to order online. You can also find their wines at Maisonry in Yountville or at local restaurants like The Restaurant at Meadowood and The French Laundry.

Lail’s daughters are peripherally involved in the business, supporting their mother at tastings and events. Both live in Napa Valley, but are pursuing successful careers outside of the wine industry. With her health and vitality, it doesn’t seem like Lail

is anywhere near retiring. As long as she continues enjoying the thrills and challenges of the wine business and sharing these wines and memories with her family, there’s no reason to stop.

Earlier this year, she and her husband, architect Jon Lail, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary by renewing their wedding vows at Solage Calistoga. “We were drinking our own wines and a little champagne as well,” she says. “Wine is forever about people. The wines you carry in your head and in your heart are the wines you met with people.”