BILL HARLAN
NAPA'S EMPIRE BUILDER

ANNUAL CALIFORNIA CABERNET REPORT

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H. William Harlan in the library of his Howard Backen-designed winery west of Oakville.
BILL HARLAN’S
AMAZING SAGA

The man behind one of Napa’s greatest reds builds his legacy and puts together the last pieces of a complicated puzzle

By Kim Marcus
Photographs by Alanna Hale
Bill Harlan is cruising eastward on the Oakville Grade Road in the heart of Napa Valley when he decides to demonstrate how quickly his Tesla can accelerate. It takes off instantly, with a surge that should be rated in g-forces—the perfect vehicle for a former professional motorcycle racer who is now one of Napa’s most successful vintners. Harlan equally relishes the Tesla, created by Silicon Valley entrepreneur Elon Musk, as a California success story, and Harlan is very proud of his Golden State heritage.

Success drives the man as well. At his Harlan Estate in the foothills of the rugged Mayacamas Mountains off Oakville Grade, he helped redefine Napa Valley wine in the 1990s. The winery is a member of an elite class—the ranks of which include Screaming Eagle, Schrader, Bryant Family, Colgin and others that came to define cult wines and catapulted Napa Cabernet to new stylistic dimensions and renown, as well as to new levels of criticism for high prices, scarcity and ripeness.

Deeply concentrated and richly flavored, the Cabernet-based Harlan Estate red is consistently one of Napa’s most coveted bottlings, and at $850 for the 2011 vintage, it remains atop the appellation’s pricing pyramid. Produced from approximately 33 acres of meticulously cultivated hillside vineyards, the wine has more than fulfilled the goal Harlan envisioned with his initial purchase of the land in 1984: to build a “first-growth” of California.

But Harlan, 75, is not satisfied. He’s intent on establishing a wine dynasty along the lines of the great winemaking families of Europe. It’s an audacious goal for one of Napa Valley’s most enigmatic personalities.

Although Harlan has been at the center of some of Napa’s key projects of the modern era, such as Auction Napa Valley, he’s kept his visibility to a minimum, unlike his self-described mentor, the late Robert Mondavi, who was a maximalist when it came to attracting the public eye. Yet Harlan shares Mondavi’s desire to have Napa recognized as a star on the world stage.

“I feel Napa Valley has the chance, the potential, to become a national treasure,” Harlan says. “The community is as important as the individual. We have to have the proper balance, socially, environmentally and aesthetically.”

The search for balance in his wines, in his estates and in his philosophy, and the quest for a lasting legacy, are the driving forces in Harlan’s life now. It’s been a long and unique path to where he stands today, with his quiet, private side in marked contrast to the rich, bold style of his wines (see “Master of Style,” page 64). “Bill definitely lives in the realm of the visionary,” says former partner Robin Lail, who has deep roots in Napa. “He never falters in his pursuit of excellence. He keeps a low profile. I don’t think fanfare is something that suits him. Success suits him. Creativity suits him.”

Napa vintner Fred Schrader marvels at what he calls the consistency of Harlan’s personality, defined by a pursuit of perfection.
as well as his ability to inspire loyalty among those who worked for him. "I guess in a way, [Harlan] may not be the most spontaneous person in the world, but he's always there to lend a hand when it's needed," Schrader says. "I think the fact that he's secretive is part of his mystique."

Harlan evinces the passions of an autodidact with a steely resolve, but his current status as one of Napa's grandees belies the wild oats of his youth. One of his first big financial successes came in real estate, developing houseboats moored at the tiny village of Sausalito, across the Golden Gate from San Francisco. At the time, in the early 1970s, there were virtually no regulations governing houseboats, and Harlan was able to build his trust by profiting from that loophole. In the bargain, he built himself a 5,000-square-foot floating palace called the Taj Mahal.

It was quite the step up for a son of devoutly religious parents who was raised in the sleepy environs of 1940s Orange County, Calif., in a village then called Pico.

As fast as the Tesla goes, its speed is irrelevant on the bumpy dirt leading to Harlan's latest project, which he calls Promontory—Napa Valley Territory. The nascent estate lies up a narrow draw in the Mayacamas, used by pioneers in the 19th century and by bootleggers in the 20th century. "Promontory is the most exciting thing we've done yet, and it is really setting the table for the next generation," Harlan says.

The Tesla is left behind, replaced by a souped-up ATV that buzzes up a steep, narrow roadway winding through rugged, forested slopes thick with evergreens, California laurel, live oak, madrone, giant manzanita and the occasional Douglas fir or scrub pine. We pass an illicit distillery, now in ruins, which stood until last year's Napa earthquake. The area is so remote that even during Prohibition, government authorities never discovered it. "Because of the scale and privacy, you don't feel you are in Napa Valley," Harlan says. "It's wild. It's rugged. The 20th century passed it by."

Harlan seems most at ease and unrestrained here amid the woods, rocks and vines. His eyes glow a periwinkle blue; with a trimmed

Head winemaker Bob Levy (left) and estate director Don Weaver (center) have been with Harlan since the early 1980s. Cory Empting (right) is being groomed as Levy's successor and is key to developing the new Promontory brand.

mane of white hair and tightly cropped beard, he looks a bit like a modern-day John Brown, but with a poker face. His only detectable weakness is his fair complexion, which he must protect from Napa's summer sun with a straw hat.

His phrases are measured and precise. His controlled intensity is evident in the on-message nature his staff communicates to the outside world. Harlan wants little daylight between his vision and the reality it has created. And now that vision is focused on Promontory.
Bill and Deborah’s two children—Amanda and Will, both in their twenties—are assuming greater roles in the family business.
“Promontory is the missing piece of the puzzle. It’s been almost 56 years since I first had this dream to own a vineyard and make wine in Napa Valley,” he says. “The land here at Promontory has really changed the people [on his staff] who’ve helped to build it. They didn’t call it Promontory at first; they called it Purgatory.”

That was part of Promontory’s draw for Harlan. He’s always chosen overlooked sites, bypassing the crowded valley floor and looking instead to the hills, where, he says, the highest quality grapes can be grown. As he’d done with Harlan Estate, which lies about a half-mile north of Promontory as the crow flies, Harlan patiently explored the potential of Promontory, walking the steep hillsides, assessing its various exposures and soils. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve gotten poison oak, and I must have had 50 to 100 tick bites,” he discloses.

Harlan long coveted this site because of what he considers its unique geology—a complex mix of volcanic, metamorphic and sedimentary bedrock that’s been inverted by faulting, called a klippe. So instead of the volcanics that cover most of Napa’s slopes and vales, there is a layer of Franciscan formation, rich with sandstone, graywacke and mudstone, as well as primordial volcanic and plutonic rock. Vineyard exposures cover all 360 degrees of the compass.

Harlan began to assemble its 840 acres in 2008; he had first spied its potential in 1984 but had to wait for the right moment to secure the best deal. There were about 70 acres of vineyards included in the purchase (the fruit had previously supplied Girard and later Ladera wineries), most of which he is in the process of replanting. Today about 18 acres of vineyards are producing, with another 20 in the ground. Harlan envisions about 10 percent of the land—85 or so acres—to be eventually dedicated to vineyard. The rest will be left wild and undisturbed.

William Harlan has family ties to California that go back to the Gold Rush era. He grew up of modest means; his father was a meatpacker, and his mother stayed at home to help raise William and his two younger brothers. While a student at University of California, Berkeley, in 1958, he visited the then-quiet Napa Valley wine country and became entranced with a vision of someday owning a small vineyard and making wine. But there would be many adventures before he would settle down and realize such a genteel life.

For a time, he professionally raced motorcycles, worked at a flying school, and even crewed on an oceanographic schooner operated by Stanford University, sailing around the world and visiting the seven continents. He also found time to spend almost a year traveling from Morocco to South Africa, on a shoestring, and did a stint as a professional poker player at a Lake Tahoe casino.

In 1966, he was in Napa Valley the week that the Robert Mondavi Winery opened, a seminal event in the valley’s history that would do much to spark the modern wine boom in Napa. Harlan later became good friends with Mondavi, learning many lessons about the wine business from him.

But first there was a fortune to be made. In 1968 Harlan took a job as a stockbroker in San Francisco, and would later cofound one of Northern California’s most successful real estate firms, Pacific Union, where he remains a partner in the development operations to this day (he sold the finance arm of the company in 2000 for an estimated $40 million). At Pacific Union, he has helped oversee major residential and condominium projects in the Bay Area, Monterey County and Lake Tahoe. He set down roots in Napa Valley in 1978, when he bought a run-down golf course and country club outside St. Helena known as Meadowood.

Today, he is still the managing partner of Meadowood, which recently underwent a $60 million renovation. Harlan is also the general partner of one of Napa’s most successful and influential restaurants, Tia Vigne in St. Helena.

“When I grew up, there were very few rules, except we couldn’t use the word ‘can’t,’” Harlan says. “I was never a ‘school’ student. If I couldn’t put it into practice, I couldn’t understand its worth.”

In addition to his dream of owning a vineyard and making wine (as well as sailing around the world), he also wanted a family. But he came to it late, finally settling down at age 45. “There were too many girls, and I was having too much fun,” he says. Harlan has now been married 29 years, and today he and his wife, Deborah, live a stone’s throw from the Harlan winery on a patch of forested slope that lies a bit higher in the Mayacamas. “My favorite part is the land.
“Bill had no interest in buying a vineyard or winery that was already there. That would have taken the fun out of it.” — DON WEAVER

It's just so beautiful—how it nestles in and is part of the landscape. It's profoundly peaceful,” Deborah says.

Set unobtrusively into that landscape by design is the Harlan winery, a modernist take on the best of the mid-20th century California aesthetic. It is built with native materials, reclaimed beams of redwood and Douglas fir and salvaged sandstone. Designed by noted architect Howard Backen, a favorite of vintners across the valley, it overlooks the famed Martha’s Vineyard, origin of what many consider the valley's first cult Cabernet, made by Joe Heitz.

When Harlan started developing the property, in the mid-1980s, there were no vineyards, just forest and chaparral. “He's a determined guy and went about doing what was necessary to acquire the land,” says general manager Don Weaver, 62, who has been with Harlan since 1983. "There were so many people who put their shoulders to the wheel. There was a lot of dust, a lot of sweat and a lot of toil to build it. [Harlan] had no particular interest in buying a vineyard or a winery that was already there. That would have taken all the fun out of it for him,” Weaver says.

The story of Harlan’s rise in the world of Napa Valley wine begins with a meeting he had with Mondavi soon after purchasing Meadowood. “He asked me why I acquired it, and what my dreams were,” Harlan recalls. Unfortunately, Harlan quickly found out that his goal of converting the Meadowood golf course into a vineyard was a fool's errand: The area was too cool, and the soils weren’t the best.

Yet Mondavi had other ideas in advising Harlan at the time; he wanted to start a charity auction in Napa along the same model as the famous Hospice de Beaune in Burgundy, and he felt the neutral ground offered by Meadowood made it a prime venue. To show Harlan what the future might offer, Mondavi set up a five-week tour for him in France—three weeks touring the top growths of Bordeaux and two weeks in Burgundy visiting the grands crus.

Working for Mondavi was Robin Lail, the daughter of John Daniel, the former owner of Inglenook who oversaw the making of some of Napa Valley’s greatest wines starting in the 1940s. Lail went on the 1980 trip to France as well, and she proved a savvy guide. "She knew the European culture of wine at a high level," Harlan says. "I learned about the auction during the trip, but it also changed my whole perception of wine and the future. Before, I had lived in the now, but after, I looked to the future."

Harlan soon agreed to host the auction, and Mondavi put Lail in charge. Still held at Meadowood and run since that first event in 1983 by the Napa Valley Vintners Association, Auction Napa Valley has become one of the nation’s premier wine events, with proceeds going to local health-care organizations.

Key to Harlan’s success is his talent for finding the right partners, first in the real estate business and then in wine. Tight personal relationships are the foundation. “I’ve always had partners, except for Harlan Estate,” he says. “I feel very fortunate to have had financial and entrepreneurial partners through my career.” And what makes a good partnership for Harlan?

“You have to start with a clarity of vision, values and purpose. You have to look at the time horizon, and you can’t be looking at quarterly earnings,” Harlan expounds. “You have to have similar taste, style, voice and tone,” he adds.

One current Harlan partner is billionaire Stan Kroenke, who owns the NBA’s Denver Nuggets, the NHL’s Colorado Avalanche and the NFL’s St. Louis Rams, among others. Kroenke is also owner of Napa cult Cabernet winery Screaming Eagle and has stakes in Meadowood, Promontory and Napa Valley Reserve, the latter a private wine club, founded in 2005, that is another Harlan brainchild and money machine, perhaps his biggest yet.

Harlan invested $15 million to get Napa Valley Reserve going; each of its 600 current members (who pay a $150,000 initiation fee plus hefty yearly membership dues) can make their own wine under the aegis of Harlan’s staff at another Backen-designed winery located near Meadowood. Set amid 60 acres of vineyards, it features underground barrel cellars, dining rooms with a dedicated chef, salons and well-tended grounds.

Harlan, for all the ambition of his current projects, started small in Napa and learned the wine trade step by step. Once again, the vehicle was a critical partnership, this one with Lail, his guide in France. They founded Merivale with other partners in 1983, eventually working out of the old Sunny St. Helena winery (where Robert Mondavi made his first wines) right next to the current site of Tra
Vigne. “Merryvale was really where I learned about the wine business,” Harlan says.

They started out making 450 cases of wine, split between Cabernet and Chardonnay. Eventually, there would be 13 different varietals, and production reached 45,000 cases. The quality of the wines, made with purchased fruit, was consistently high, led by Chardonnay. “Robin was the Napa Valley connection,” Weaver explains.

“He asks an enormous number of questions. Even if he has the answers, he still asks questions,” Lail says. “He’s a brilliant negotiator. Not only is he tough in getting the best deal, he has a great capacity to learn,” she adds. Harlan sold Merryvale in 1996, and today Lail has her own label, Lail Vineyards.

The first Harlan wine to be released was from 1990; it didn’t hit the market until 1996 because Harlan, unsure of its quality, wanted to wait. Initially, the wine was made at Merryvale by Napa Valley veteran Bob Levy, 60, who has been with Harlan since 1984. Production of Harlan moved to the estate in 1997 to share space with the just-founded Bond, which specializes in single-vineyard bottlings from five sites throughout the mid-Napa Valley that Harlan and Levy discovered during their time at Merryvale; the fruit is purchased through decades-long contracts. The Harlan red found its permanent home at the estate when a dedicated winery was completed in 2002.

The 1990 cost $65 per bottle; each year since has seen a steady escalation, to today’s $850, which matches Screaming Eagle as the Napa Valley price leader for newly released wines. Harlan doesn’t mince words regarding the pricing. “Part of our job is to let the world know that Napa wines are at the same level of price and quality as the best of Bordeaux,” he says.

From the start, Harlan decided to focus on selling the wine through a mailing list, allowing him to control the distribution (and the margin that normally goes to middlemen), helping to set the template for the Napa cult Cabernet phenomenon. “We’re not marketing guys,” he says. “We’re here to make the finest wines and build relationships for the future.”

For the first 20 years, Harlan Estate was not profitable, according to Weaver. Only in 2004 did the cash flow turn positive, he says. There were some lean years in the late 1980s as the estate’s development began to ramp up. “He’s a poker player—you’re going to lose as many hands as you are going to win,” Weaver says. “If he just wanted to make money, he would have stayed in real estate, but he wants to create art and unique moments.” If there have been bad bets in his business dealings, they are hard to find. But there has been tragedy: His partner at Pacific Union, Peter Stocker, died in a helicopter crash in 1990.

Throughout the years, Harlan has been adept at hiring top talent. Besides Weaver and Levy, he was one of the first to sign on vineyard consultant David Abreu, who has since gone on to oversee the development and cultivation of many of Napa’s best vineyard sites. Harlan also hired Bordeaux-based consultant Michel Rolland, who has been with him since the first Harlan Estate wine was bottled and who continues to advise there to this day.

Key to developing Promontory is Harlan winemaker Cory Empting, as well as vineyard manager Mary Maher and ranch manager Micah Flynn. Empting, 35, has worked for Harlan since he was 21. A native of St. Helena, he has had a passion for wine since his teen years; he started keeping his own tasting notes at age 15. He made the Harlan connection through his mother, who worked at the winery for a time.

When Empting graduated from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo with a degree in viticulture, Harlan and Levy made him an offer: Work as Levy’s apprentice with the goal of a lifetime career at the estate. “We’re now bringing up a core that is at least a generation younger than we are,” says Levy, himself a graduate of the UC, Davis, enology program. “It’s hard to find people who can work for one job, one mission, and have the passion to follow through,” Levy says.

Empting admits that there was “a lot of crying” when he came on board. He had plans to continue his education at the University of Bordeaux; to have his life’s course laid out for him at such an early age was daunting. But he couldn’t resist the pull of Harlan, Levy and the land. “Bob [Levy] is the Ph.D., the triple Ph.D., of tannin management. But his skill is not dependent on analysis. It’s tactile and based on the senses,” Empting says.

There’s a palpable sense of transition at Harlan these days. Weaver and Levy are still overseeing their realms, but emphasize...
that they are handing over responsibilities, not only to Emptying, Maher and Flynn (all three of whom started at Harlan in 2002), but to Harlan’s two children—Will, 28, and Amanda, 24.

“He was talking about the next generation before he had kids, and with no guarantee that they would love it. I know it’s a real satisfaction to him that they are here,” Weaver says.

For three years, Will has had his own project, The Mascot, which is made from the juice of Harlan grapes that don’t qualify for the flagship. He is now playing a growing role in Promontory. “It’s the largest project we’ve undertaken,” Will says. “I think this piece of land is special. It has the potential to create a wine that is very different from the rest of Napa.” Amanda has recently signed on to help with public relations and marketing. “I truly believe in my dad’s vision, and to be part of that is the greatest gift in my career,” she says.

The inaugural vintage of Promontory, released this past spring, was 2009 (3-bottle case only; $1,200); the 2010 will be released this fall. There will be no winery at the Promontory estate. The road is too narrow and the access too circumscribed. Instead, the wine’s future home will be the site of the former Vichon winery, which Harlan purchased in 2010. He tore down the old winery and is building an entirely new 25,000-square-foot facility that is slated to be open in time for the 2016 harvest (though some 2015 wine may be made there).

Designed by Howard Backen, it lies within sight of Harlan Estate and will include room for visitors—a first for a Harlan winery. The wines will be Cabernet-based, like all Harlan ventures, but there will be plenty of opportunity for experimentation, with concrete vats, stainless-steel tanks and 500-liter oval oak casks for fermentation. “One side of the winery will be dedicated totally to research and development,” Harlan explains.

Production will eventually reach 4,000 cases a year at Promontory, compared to about 2,000 cases at Harlan Estate and 3,000 cases at Bond. Harlan pegs total production at 8,000 to 10,000 cases a year for all three labels. He cites similar production levels at Domaine de la Romanée-Conti in Burgundy and Château Haut-Brion in Bordeaux, examples of wine estate models he wants to emulate. “That’s where I feel the odds are the best—to have handmade quality as well as the critical mass to survive to the next generation, and for me that is enough.” There may be single-vineyard wines someday at Promontory, he adds.

It seems as though this will truly be Harlan’s last project, but given his love of building and developing, that’s not a sure bet. He admits he’s searched the world and had opportunities to launch additional ventures, but none have enticed him. “I’ve looked everywhere, but every time I come back to Napa, I buy more land,” he says, with a gleam in his eye.