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A TECHNICAL LOOK AT **BLANCPAIN'S**
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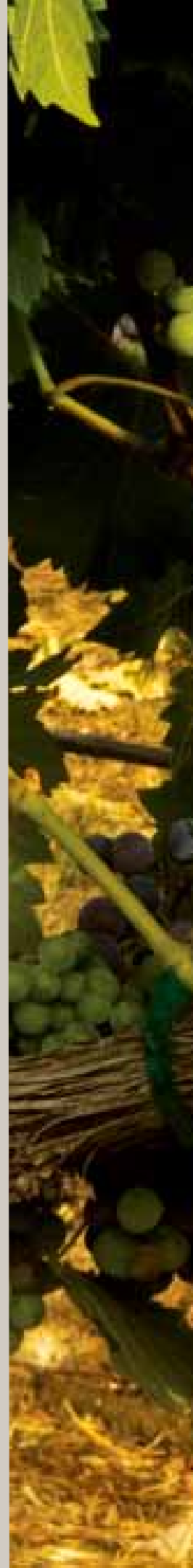
MARC A. HAYEK
A Very Personal Portrait

ADRIA SUPER TROFEO
An Intense Gentlemen's Race

SO WHO IS GOLIATH ANYWAY?

WHEN HERB LAMB WALKS THE ROWS OF HIS MOUNTAINTOP SITE OR STANLEY CHENG SURVEYS THE UNDULATIONS OF HIS VINEYARDS ENCIRCLING A SMALL LAKE AT THE EASTERN BORDER OF THE NAPA VALLEY APPELLATION, IT IS CERTAIN THAT NEITHER THINKS OF HIMSELF AS A GUERRILLA FOOT SOLDIER MUCH LESS A REVOLUTIONARY. RISK TAKERS, YES. ENTREPRENEURS, YES. MAYBE EVEN PIONEERS. BUT ACTUALLY IF THEY INDULGED IN A LITTLE INTROSPECTION THEY COULD COME TO SEE THEMSELVES AT LEAST AS FOOT SOLDIERS IN A REVOLUTION AND LIKELY AS OFFICERS IN THE CAMPAIGN. THE REASON? THEY ARE BOTH NOT ONLY IN THE THICK OF A REVOLUTION IN THE WORLD OF CALIFORNIA WINE BUT HAVE ACQUIRED HEADLINES FOR THEIR ROLES.

BY JEFFREY S. KINGSTON





For those with an acute sense of history, the word “revolution” when applied to California wine may have lost a bit of its edge from over-use. Why? Because by any normal count, there have been at least four of them: the initial revolution which transformed the Napa Valley from fruit orchards to vineyards; the second following Prohibition where few endeavored to make great wine, instead opting for cheap commercial high volume wines which could be hawked to then not very sophisticated American palates; the third coming in the 70’s, marked most pointedly when two California wines, a Chateau Montelena Chardonnay (made by a Yugoslav immigrant, Mike Grgich) and a Stags Leap Cabernet (made by a former college professor Warren Winiarski) upset a selection of France’s finest wines and won the legendary 1976 Paris tasting, thereby proving that world class wine could be made in California and launching a movement to more broadly replicate that success throughout the Napa Valley; and now a fourth, as waves of micro-wineries have surged to the fore upending and overwhelming the giant houses who previously dominated the market for top end Napa Valley wines. In many ways this fourth revolution is the most profound because it has happened by stealth. No master organization. No grand plan. Just dozens and dozens of completely obsessive vineyard owners, like Herb Lamb and his wife Jennifer

and Stanley Cheng and his wife Helen, ably guided by inspirational wine makers, who one by one decided to find a plot and make wine to please themselves. If you were surveying the Napa scene over these past 10 years, it would be easy to miss what was happening. With wineries like Mondavi and Beaulieu flooding the market with oceans of wine, hundreds of thousands of cases a wine a year each, how could you even perceive or detect Herb Lamb with his yearly output of 250 cases? Some may wish to call it a form of guerilla warfare. Without anyone being able to mark the day when the transformation took place, or said another way, when the coup d’etat surged to victory, the big reputation, large production premium wineries, even those American/French joint ventures which were the subject of splashy publicity, have seemed to vanish from serious wine discussions in California. They have been overwhelmed and supplanted by the micro-producers. To be in the know, to be a true California wine connoisseur now requires not simply knowledge of the identities of these wineries, but mastery of the tricks to obtain a precious bottle or two of these ruthlessly allocated wines.

How is it possible for these microscopically sized wineries to have seized the collective consciousness of Napa wine aficionados? With quantities in the range of 250 cases for





At center, a wine shop in the heart of the Napa Valley. Every bottle on offer is a cult wine. Large wineries need not apply.

the Lamb's HL Cabernet and 400 cases for the Chengs' Hestan Cabernet the challenge would seem to be achieving any kind of visibility. Being noticed at all. I mused about this apparent paradox as I strolled through the Hestan vineyards with Stanley Cheng and one of his wine makers, Jeff Gaffner, who crafts the Chengs' range of Stephanie wines (which include a sumptuous Bordeaux blend, labeled with notable understatement "Red Wine"). Jeff had the answer and as he spoke it set off fireworks with its dazzling simplicity and truth. "The Internet". Before the ubiquity of the internet, successful micro production simply would not have been possible. How could such a producer induce large chains of wine shops to stock wines available in trickle quantities? How would wine critics even know that they existed? In the pre-internet eras this would have been folly. But now where word of mouth is propagated worldwide, where even casual musings are captured by Google's web crawlers for everyone to see, where tweets spread virally, it becomes possible. And if you are good, this freebie publicity quickly overwhelms the ability to supply.

What is also striking about this success of the Lilliputians, true of both the Lambs and the Chengs, is that financial reward is most often not the motivator. Large commercial wineries have to be successful. With large land



Herb Lamb and his wife Jennifer.

holdings worth princely sums, sprawling facilities and at least a brigade to attend the wines, anything less risks hemorrhaging money. For these large scale operations, conservatism is the order of the day. A philosophy of “just don’t screw up”. Do the chemical analysis, measure the brix, get the lab results back from the consulting oenologists and do what they say. That world view is turned topsy turvey in the case of the Lambs and Chengs. For them, it was all about risk.

To begin with, neither even owned existing vineyard land. The Lamb parcel is located on what essentially is a mountain top, perched above the tony Meadowood resort and famed Silverado Trail and in the foothills of Howell Mountain. Not only was this heavily forested and undeveloped, but, according to traditional wine making orthodoxy, the slope faced precisely the wrong way, north east in its exposure instead of south. When the Chengs bought their land it was a cow pasture, grazing land. What attracted them was its seclusion, rolling hills and a large lake. Nothing in the immediate environs even hinted wine making with a range of steep hills separating them from the main portion of the Napa Valley.

The Chengs planted their vines without great expectation. With no one nearby to set an example, proof of

concept, if you will, they could not know whether the effort would succeed. But they made a few brilliant decisions. They hired inspired wine makers. Initially, these were Jeff Gaffner, who now is celebrating his 26th vintage of wine making in Napa and renowned Mark Herold. Today Gaffner continues with the Stephanie wines while Thomas Brown, who has garnered not just one but two 100 point scores from wine critic Robert Parker (an even more difficult accolade than being awarded Michelin 3 star rankings for two restaurants, as 100 point Parker scores are far more rarely doled out), takes over the Hestan production. Equally brilliantly, they gave the winemakers free reign.

The Lambs seemingly backed into becoming vintners. Herb, a soil scientist, had an idea that his parcel could produce excellent wine, specifically cabernet sauvignon. He was not troubled by the contrast between his high altitude backward facing slope and the famed vineyards lying on the flat valley floor beneath him (the Rutherford dust and Oakville bench), exposed to full sun. Indeed in his mind, his parcel had all the advantages. Unlike Burgundy and Bordeaux where achieving full ripeness is the yearly challenge, Napa poses the opposite problem. There is too much sun, heat and dryness. For those who don’t manage these elements well, cooked fruit







and excessively jammy wines are the result. Facing the wrong way and capturing cooling breezes in the afternoon protects his fruit and allows him to indulge in maximum “hang time” for the grapes. Hang time means that the grapes can be left on the vine longer allowing the grapes to reach maximum ripeness and balance. Without exposing the vineyard to excessive sun, this extra hang time allows subtle flavor and aromatic elements in the grapes to reach an extraordinary degree of maturity. The Chengs also boast a micro climate which allows extended hang time. Two gaps in the hills surrounding their property suck in cooling breezes from the San Francisco Bay, to protect the fruit. So in both cases, harvesting late has become part of the plan as the Lambs and Chengs pick the grapes in mid October.

Like the Chengs, the Lambs early on hooked up with a brilliant wine maker, Mike Trujillo, whose wines they admired. Ironically, the potential of what they had was not discovered first under their own label. Trujillo, thrilled with the quality of the fruit, had chosen the cabernet from the Lamb’s vineyard as one of the key components in the small production Karl Lawrence Cabernet which debuted in 1991. The second wine to showcase the quality of the Lamb vineyard was the Colgin Herb Lamb Vineyard Cabernet made by wine maker Helen Turley. As

these two wines acquired their reputation, the Lambs began keeping some of their grape production for themselves, asking Mike Trujillo to bottle a few wines made from grapes that were not being used for the Karl Lawrence or Colgin wines. Far from being commercial, these were so-called “shiner” bottles, meaning bottles without labels, and were destined only for family and friends.

It did not take long for Herb and Jennifer to realize what they had and make, what with the benefit of time and hindsight, seems to be an obvious and easy decision. Trujillo’s Karl Lawrence and Colgin’s Herb Lamb Vineyards Cabernet had proven that great wine could be made. So why not hire Trujillo, who knew the vineyard and knew, more than anybody else, the secrets of succeeding with it, to make wine for them. HL Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon was thus born. A mere four rows of vines, enough for but 50 cases was set aside for their own production, which debuted with the ‘97 vintage.

Fifty cases, of course, is not micro-production. It is nano-production. That has now eased somewhat as the Lambs have decided to keep all of their grapes for themselves. The Colgin Herb Lamb Vineyard Cabernet is no more and the quantities of HL Vineyard Cabernet

DR. GEORGE DERBALIAN



Dr. George Derbalian is a *Lettres du Brassus* wine expert. Dr. Derbalian is the founder of Atherton Wine Imports, located in northern California. Not only has he become one of the United States' premier importers of fine wines, but he has acquired a well-deserved reputation as one of the leading and most respected wine connoisseurs and expert tasters in the world. Each year, Dr. Derbalian travels the wine circuits of Europe and the United States, meeting with wine producers, owners of the finest domains, chef de chai, and other key figures in the world of wine. Throughout the course of each year, he tastes literally many thousands of current production and vintage wines. In this issue Dr. Derbalian shares with us his discovery of the Napa Hestan and Stephanie wines from Stanley and Helen Cheng. In addition we are grateful to Mr. Ed Schneider who introduced us to Herb and Jennifer Lamb and their Herb Lamb Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon also featured in this Issue.

Sauvignon have soared to, tongue planted firmly in cheek, lofty heights of 250 cases. To put that into perspective, the entirety of the UK is able to obtain but 5 cases. Shrewd California wine fanatics who have mastered the techniques of gaining admission to the sales list via the web site are allocated two bottles a year.

The Chengs' wines currently span a range beyond their original flagship Hestan Cabernet, made from the beginning by Mark Herold. Pure serendipity led them to Herold. Dining at the famed French Laundry restaurant, the only restaurant on the West Coast accorded three stars by Michelin, the Chengs were steered by the sommelier to a bottle of Merus Cabernet, completely unknown at the time. Their request of the sommelier, "give us something that is rare and extraordinary". The sommelier's reply "Here's the best Cabernet I have ". The risk of following the sommelier's advice was minor. After all, if they didn't like the wine they could always order a bottle of something else. There was no sending this one back; they swooned. Following dinner they tracked Herold down, who at the time was quite literally making Merus in his garage. He was looking for clients and the Chengs were looking for a winemaker. The second risk they took with Herold was a bit bigger than the selection of a bottle of wine for a meal, as they hired

him to make Hestan, trusting that what he had done for himself in his garage could be done with their grapes. Their first wine, the 2002 Hestan Cabernet, released in 2004, debuted with a bang, Robert Parker bestowing a score of 95 points. To put that into perspective, most of the elite Bordeaux chateaux only rarely earn those marks. Hestan did it on its very first try.

Buoyed by the success of the Hestan, which continues to rack up mammoth scores from the critics, the Chengs wanted to create a more supple softer wine than one fashioned out of essentially 100% Cabernet (Hestan does have a minor percentage of Petit Verdot). For that they sought out Jeff Gaffner and the Stephanie wine was created. Although there are now three different Stephanie wines, the flagship is the Bordeaux blend, for which Gaffner mixes the full range of red Bordeaux varietals, Cabernet, Petit Verdot, Malbec, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. It too has cemented its cult status, garnering top scores.

As I spent time with the Lambs and Chengs, as much as they were similar in so many respects — small production, new land opened up for the first time to vineyards, selection of brilliant wine makers, emphasis on long hang times for the fruit, lists of clients begging for







Stanley Cheng and his wife Helen.

allocations — there was one area that emerged in our conversations where they parted company, that is whether or not to submit wines to the critics, most notably Robert Parker. The Chengs have given Parker access to their wines; the Lambs have chosen the opposite. The Chengs decision to let Parker taste succeeded brilliantly and the resulting Parker scores insure full sell out of the wine. The Lambs see it differently. They want to make their wine to please their tastes and that of their winemaker, Mike Trujillo. They were never out to please Robert Parker or any other wine critic. Of course they were fortunate in being spared from having to establish themselves with a Parker score that could be virally propagated on the internet, as the Colgin wines from their vineyard had already blazed the path and built a reputation. Interestingly the Chengs, too, never sought to please Parker and only smile sardonically when told of wine analysis labs in the valley which claim to have reverse engineered Robert Parker's palate and will happily test wine samples to see if they meet the profile for 100 points based upon chemical composition, comparing the sample to wines that have won the ultimate accolade. Fortunately for the Chengs, Parker found their wines and liked them. Unlike the Lambs HL, the Chengs' Hestan and Stephanie continue to be reviewed.







Whether or not you believe the critics have been a factor in building these successes, cult wine has not only firmly established itself in Napa, it is poised to move well beyond its current Cabernet stronghold. At the intellectual core of the movement are inspired, risk taking young winemakers. Not only do they feel liberated from the bondage of old winemaking rules, they have accumulated experience from not just the US and France, but from all over the world. Their new frontier? Experimenting with global varietals. Whether or not they succeed? Well that is what risk is all about. One thing is now all but certain, these emerging Napa winemakers have captured mind share and have our full attention.



TASTING NOTES

HESTAN CABERNET 2002

Hestan Cabernet 2002. A richly colored, muscular, concentrated wine. Wonderfully complex, it offers up waves of intense fully ripe black fruits, cherries, currants, blackberries. Powerful, yet focused on the palate, with great precision and concentration of the fruit and ripe tannins that are now fully resolved. Sweet cherry finish. A superbly complex example of Cabernet.

STEPHANIE BORDEAUX BLEND 2006

This wine has all of the breed and complexity of a First growth St. Emillion. Marion berries and blackberries dominate the nose and palate backed by spicy sweet vanilla oak. There is an exotic character to the wine as the spice and fruit play off each other. Very round. Each sip offers up new dimensions to this very complex wine.

STEPHANIE CABERNET 2006

Wonderful sweet chocolate plum nose. Rich, deep and ripe. Remarkably tight focused fruit on the palate. The precision of the flavors is stunning.

STEPHANIE MERLOT 2006

Black fruits and licorice in the nose. The roundness of the merlot is expressed with an almost furry character in the mouth. Spice fills out the finish. The wine is 85% merlot, 15% cabernet.

MEYER CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2005

A forward, accessible, easy drinking Cabernet. The nose offers up plentiful scents of currants, anise and spice. Wonderful focus in the mouth with a sweet fruit finish. Tannins very round. (Meyer Cabernet is a third series produced by the Chengs)

HL HERB LAMB VINEYARDS CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2000

Raspberries dominate the nose. The concentration is dazzling as is the focus and precision of the flavors. Not an ounce of flab to be found. Balance between fruit and oak is exceptional. Not a trace of dryness in the fully ripe and round tannins. This is one of those wines that re-writes the script on what great Napa cabernet can achieve.

EII CABERNET SAUVIGNON 2007

An extremely rich forward concentrated wine built for early drinking. Sweet fruit is woven into all the elements. The nose offers up scents of blackberries and black currants that follow into the palate there joined by notes of chocolate and sweet vanilla oak. Round ripe tannins show in the finish which brings along some spice.

LAMB VINEYARDS ALMOST HOWELL MOUNTAIN 2007

Bright fruit, well balanced by acid dominated by red currants. Layers of spice alternating with hints of chocolate and vanilla. Already fully accessible. (Note: not available commercially)
