

# THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF OUR TIME AND PLACE

An Interview With Robin Lail





*Feature Profile.*

## T H E C O N S C I O U S N E S S O F O U R T I M E A N D P L A C E A N I N T E R V I E W W I T H R O B I N L A I L

*By Martin Reyes, MW.*

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Fourth generation vintner Robin Lail reflects on her family's legacy and Napa Valley's continuing heritage during an afternoon conversation in her Howell Mountain home with respected wine industry figure and friend, Master of Wine, Martin Reyes.

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Robin Daniel Lail's impressive accomplishments in the Napa Wine industry — including the founding of Dominus, Merryvale Vineyards, as well as Auction Napa Valley — are familiar to many, and the saga of Inglenook and the Niebaum-Daniel family, has been well-documented. This fact afforded an opportunity to engage in a more holistic conversation about aspects of her story that crystalize essential elements of Napa Valley: the evolving importance of our vineyards, our wines, and our community. By virtue of 140 years of official family history, Robin's lens is valuable, and unique in our time.

Our conversation was broad and intimate at once. Robin shared perspectives and the occasional epiphany as she reflected on blissful memories tempered by fracturing losses. We discussed the crucial relationships that sparked her gradual return to the wine industry and the founding of Lail Vineyards. With irrepressible fascination, Robin explored how collaborative passions imbue wine with a persistent magical touch that deepens notions of home, humor, and humanity. Finally, we considered the appellation's evolution and the topics of greatest concern for its long-term well-being and stewardship.

After a three-hour conversation, those of us in the room left her home feeling as if we'd crept out of

an enchanted, dog-eared, leather-bound storybook. For those who know her, Robin has always been incredibly relatable, even if her background might not suggest such a feature. Her storytelling potency begs self-reflecting; it is hard not to ponder our own stories, conflicts, and emotional moments that resonate with hers. I hope you enjoy this conversation with Robin Lail as much as we did. — Martin

### CHAPTER 1: YESTERDAY

The heritage is impressive. Robin's great-granduncle, Gustave Niebaum, founded Inglenook in 1879 and was the first vintner in Napa Valley to incorporate concepts like vineyard spacing, sorting tables, cellar hygiene, and estate bottling. The winery's shocking gold medal haul at the 1889 Paris World Expo predated the Judgement of Paris by almost 80 years. John Daniel Jr., Niebaum's great nephew, took over the estate in 1939, adding "Napa Valley" to Inglenook's labels before any other winery, and was instrumental in the founding of NVV Association. Robin, John's daughter, recalls her life on the historic property and the subsequent turmoil after its sale following John's death in 1970. She was in her mid-20s at the time.



*photo credit: unknown photographer, courtesy of Robin Lail*





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**Martin:** Robin, you’ve been interviewed so many times that your life is practically on public record, and I appreciate you sitting with me today. What is your most vivid memory growing up?

**Robin:** That’s easy, there are several. I don’t ever say “favorite” or “most.” I say “favorites.” One of those memories was the winery during harvest, sensing even as a youngster the amazing crescendo that happens in this valley at harvest time, this fabulous amalgamation of energy and the arrival of the fruit, and the subsequent smell, the wonderful aromatics of that fruit being crushed and then fermenting. A beautiful memory for me.

Another that’s very much in my heart is driving through the vineyards with my dad on Sunday afternoons in this lovely old pickup truck, which I thought was a dinosaur. Listening to him talk about the varietals on the right and the left-hand side of the road and pointing out the shapes of the leaves — and then, just overall, my dad. Just my dad is my most stunning memory. It’s going to make me cry.

**Goodness Robin, me too. Listening to that makes me wonder which of my little daughter’s experiences today will become her future self’s memories of her father.**

I never thought about it until this second, but I have always had this knowledge — it’s not something you can teach anybody, it’s just inner knowledge — that

wine is about people. It’s about people, and if it’s not about people, it’s just some drink that’s not so interesting. Beautiful wine is about the passion of the people behind it.

**The period around your father’s passing is marked by loss on many levels. For many who know your story, we can empathize in a visceral way. Reflecting over the years, is there some lesson that came out of that time of loss?**

There’s a little hill that sits between Inglenook and Beaulieu. I thought this way we could keep a tiny little part of the former estate. It was perfect and undeveloped and just off to the left. I tried to make an agreement with the bank. But my mother intervened, almost as if she wanted to erase everything, and the bank went along with her. It was not a nice time, and I was extremely bitter. But I woke up one morning, and I thought, “Okay, this is no fun, who am I hurting here?” For whatever fortunate reason, I was able to stop and say, “It’s done. It’s finished. That’s it.” I was able to carve out Napanook for my sister and myself, and that was it.

It reminds me of those times when Pollyanna friends offer words of support when something bad happens to us: “You’ve got your whole life ahead. Don’t worry.” And I think that’s true. If none of that had happened, if I had grown up and just taken over the winery, I would be such a different person. I might be a tad arrogant, honestly — you know, no dirt on my shoes to scrape

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off when I went home at night, because I was king of the hill. I never would’ve known if I could’ve done it myself.

**Instead, when the brand/estate sold, your path diverted quite strongly away from wine. So let’s match that moment, just for fun. Tell me about yourself without mentioning wine.**

Growing up, my sister was the smart one, winning many awards in school and beloved by her teachers. Then I came along and I was...undefined, let’s say. So I decided I would be different. From the time I was a four-year old girl, I had two ideas. First, that I was meant to leave the Earth a better place than when I found it. Second, that I was fascinated by people, meaning where do we connect? That was my fascination. It’s easy to find out how you don’t connect with somebody, but there’s a world of possibilities if you do! You can be friends, lovers, students, and teachers. You can connect that person to others who might help them achieve a goal. I also love acts of random kindness, the things you do that are impulsive, that make people happy or just make them smile. It’s just kind of like paying forward life in a way.

I can also tell you — and I don’t like this part so much — that I am an “other-directed” person. I want so much to be “inner-directed.” To have my drummer inside saying, okay, today I think we should do this. But in reality, I’m more concerned about you and how that

impacts me. I would just love to live this exact life...no changes except being inner-directed instead of other-directed. I meditate, even nowadays, trying to change the flow of this thing.

**You left Napa for a few years and came back in 1972 with your family. You were reluctant to get back into the wine business again, and yet gradually it happened.**

I did not want to get back in the wine business. How could I possibly recreate within the space of one generation what had gone away? Inglenook had been the fete of Napa Valley. I just thought it was completely impossible.

**Then comes Robert Mondavi in 1977.**

So Robert Gerald Mondavi lured me into a love affair with the wine business. I’m writing a memoir now, and one of the beautiful things that happens in this process is you get epiphanies along the way. A couple of years ago, I really had a very forceful one: Robert Mondavi didn’t need Robin Lail, who was so full of herself...he didn’t need me as his secretary. I was just being trained.

**Without realizing it?**

Without having the vaguest clue. I was the secretary, but I went to all the management tastings. I went to lunch with Bob and he would buy five bottles of wine and say, “Okay, Robin, taste these wines and tell me what you find.” Often, he would lecture me about getting back





Photo credit: Darren Loveland

into the wine business. I would respond the same way: “Bob, we don’t have any money” He would say, “And yet you have that vineyard.” That’s about as far as it would go every time.

## CHAPTER 2: TODAY

Eventually, of course, it did go further. Robin Lail co-founded Dominus in 1982 with Christian Moueix— as well as Merryvale Vineyards with Bill Harlan — the following year. In 1995, together with her daughters, Robin founded Lail Vineyards. During this period, the adolescent winegrowing region grew up alongside her and gained an enviable reputation; history showed that Napa wines could stand alongside the best on the planet. While Robin doesn’t shy away from placing her wines in that conversation, she’s discovered something of equal significance. Wine, glorious as it may be, serves its most powerful purpose as a vehicle to unite persons in enchanted conviviality better than any other libation. It appears her propulsion remains, to this day, influenced by the bright-eyed wonder and unspoiled sunniness of her precocious four-year-old self.

**In a recent video interview, your face lit up when the subject turned to Lail Vineyards. I thought, “Okay, that’s what she means by finding her own passion for wine at age 55.” What was the eventual catalyst for Lail Vineyards?**

Merryvale, as we know, became very successful, but it took such a long time to overcome inertia with that project. Then, with Dominus, I was thrilled having this man who remains arguably still the most famous man in the wine business work with our Napanook property. It was a fabulous amalgamation of two family stories. But, aside from our partner’s meetings, there was no place for me to invest what was my potential passion. By 1995, at age 55 years old, my thinking was: “It’s time. If not now, when? Time is a wasting— if you’re going to do it, do it.” By the way, isn’t it ironic? Dad sold Inglenook at 55. I didn’t think about that at the time.

**At the same time, you also got a call from the owners of Inglenook.**

I love that story. We have the impression that corporations are always about the bottom line. In ‘68, when Heublein became the operators of Inglenook, I said to the local manager one day: “If you ever sell this property, I’d really like to have the right of first refusal.” That was it— just a comment from

a 38-year-old woman, no paper or anything. Fast-forward to 1995. I received a call from the chairman of Heublein, who said, “Robin, my understanding is that you were interested in having right of first refusal if we were ever selling Inglenook. Would you be interested in buying the property? We are going to put it on the market.” To me, it was just amazing that the call was ever made.

**Now Lail Vineyards is carving its own path, and today one of your best-known wines is Georgia Sauvignon Blanc. It seems, at least to me, symbolic of your winery. Marching at the beat of your own drum, staking a significant part of your reputation on a high-end non-Chardonnay white wine...**

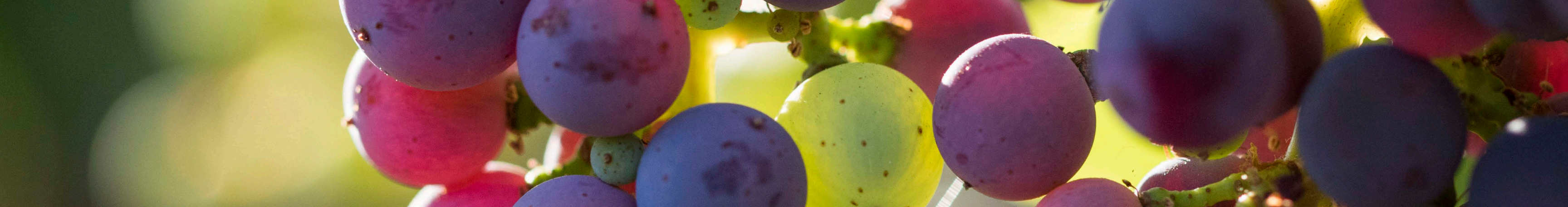
I think it is, yes — we were the first producer in the U.S. to make Sauvignon Blanc in the Bordeaux tradition and price it accordingly. People said, “You’re insane.” I just kept going. We’re a tiny little producer, but internally, if I might say so, it’s very exciting to be the first to do something. You have to stay current. It’s like playing a huge game of whack-a-mole and you think you’ve got it. You never get it. No, you never arrive in this business. I love that.

I had another epiphany just now, Martin. Lail Vineyards is completely the opposite of what I said earlier about being “other-directed.” Isn’t that amusing? This winery itself is inner-directed. We don’t spend a lot of time looking at what others do. We think about how we’re going to make wines that are considered among the very best in the world. What other kind of wine could I possibly dream about making?

**You’ve used the word “magic” several times in interviews over the years. A quote: “When Erin, Shannon, and I work together at events, there is a burst of magic, which springs from our unity and fever.” I think I knew what you meant, but I could be wrong. Some events I’ve worked just feel different, without understanding exactly why. There’s a glow, almost like a spell in this room. It feels like magic. Did I interpret it correctly?**

That’s a big part of it. Then it gets simpler than that. **When you pull the cork from a bottle and pour a glass of wine for a friend, you’re saying to that person, “I think you’re special.”** Or when you sit down at a table and you’ve had a bitch of a day, you pour a glass of wine with a friend without paying full attention to it.





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But that glass nevertheless brings a touch of subtle magic to the evening. I don't know why; it just does. Maybe it's because it's of the earth and it comes from so much passion and so much sweat and so much beer. It is, for me, palpable.

**While we are on this magic thing, you mentioned Mole Hill vineyard has a calming presence. Can you tell me about your ties to Mole Hill, past and present?**

When John and I started Lail Vineyards in 1995, we looked for new property with bare land to build a house with a sense of "there." We didn't have the cash to simply buy or build a winery. And yet, as we drove over that little hump when you come in through the gate here — the valley was chock-a-block full of fog, so you couldn't see the view— but we just knew we were here. This was home. I said in my irrational way, "This is going to be my Inglenook." This place, it catches people, delights them, and lifts them just a little bit.

**And the vineyard's name has a good story too.**

The name Mole Hill comes from my dad who loved puns. The louder the groans, the better the quality of the pun. Around 1950, his good pal, Louis Martini Sr. started making wine called Mountain Red from a gently rolling hillside vineyard in Sonoma. My dad, who had spent some time in the steep, sweeping mountain vineyards of Europe, thought that was funny. So he made an in-house wine called Mole Hill Red, with the front label showing a handsome mole holding a magnifying glass, looking at a tiny pile of dirt. On the back label he extolled the virtues of the wine with the last line reading, "This is a wine you will truly gopher."

**Thank you Robin. I'm a dad-joke collector, and will figure out how to use that later.**

[laughing] So, from our tiny three-acre estate vineyard, we decided to make a wine called Mole Hill, which was meant in jest, just to be bottled by itself for one vintage. But then it kept going and our daughters wanted to redesign the label. At first, I disliked the labels, and now I love them. The path of the mole changes and moves around each year. It's our most expensive wine and yet it has a sense of humor, which is unusual in the world of wine. We also don't submit it to the critics; the reason being that we hope to encourage people to believe in their own palates.

### CHAPTER 3: TOMORROW

As a noble steward of a successful winery, Robin confronts a future in a position not unlike that of her father and great uncle. However, she assesses what comes ahead with a thoughtfulness sharpened by recognition that Napa Valley's momentum is derived in part by the fortunes of prestige and demand. No longer do we face the headwinds of prohibition and uncertainty from a century ago. Instead, she frames the challenges that matter today as a set of responsibilities: addressing environmental and social concerns and preserving the heritages within our community. And again, we talk about magic.

**Much has changed in the valley, obviously, over these decades. What are the most interesting changes you've observed?**

**I'm fascinated by the dichotomy of the processes when dad was making wine vs. what goes on today. We did make beautiful wines back in the '40s, '50s, and '60s.** It was so much more primitive. But then again, I love the idea, for instance, that now we can know exactly when a vine needs water. We don't have to go out there and go, "Oh, it looks really dry. Harry, what do you think? I don't know, it looks a little wilted."

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I'm fascinated by the minute attention to detail in winemaking in particular, and the competitiveness — "Well, I sort four times and I have this machine." Oh, and the recurrence of things like basket presses, concrete aging vessels, dry farming, and St. George Rootstock; I'm absolutely fascinated by how these things come back around.

**What's something that hasn't really changed in Napa after all this time?**

**The core heart of the vintners, which includes a huge group of people who understand the value of cooperation, who are driven by passion, who are good stewards of the land, who are farming for their grandchildren in evermore important ways.** Napa Valley is a place where there is a word "we." Yeah, you bet we're all competitors — but if you're selling a bottle of your wine and I'm selling a bottle of my wine, that's good for both of us.

**What should we be addressing as one of our greatest challenges, right now?**

Climate change is an important issue, and I've joined an organization called The Porto Protocol. Change very often happens from the bottom up instead of from the top down. Years pass and we don't see a huge movement of the needle on action. According to the latest IPCC report, we've gone from 2050 being the really frightening time to 2040, and now we're at 2030 — that's tomorrow! Let's not sit at home and talk about it; we have to do something now, now.

So, with the Porto Protocol I thought, going back to my four-year-old self: "Here's a way that I might help make a global impact by creating a very loud voice." I plan to become a force for getting people into the protocol, the set-up of which is so doable. You can do something — it can be a little something but you can do it. I'd like to start with Napa Valley, and if successful

I'll go to Sonoma, then California, France, and to Germany and Italy and Israel.

I'm really concerned about the issue of water. In my own little strange way, I think that the next World War will be fought over water. So, we just kind of have our fingers on the windowsills here. I'm a proponent of the protection of our watershed and our oak woodlands. At one point I wanted to get the Napa Valley established as a world heritage site.

**In a perfect world, I might not feel the need to address this topic. However, I am curious if you feel compelled to say anything about gender in the wine industry. For instance, the idea that relatable role models might matter?**

So, first of all, one of the huge problems that I faced when I was a young woman was the lack of role models. I didn't have boys to talk with, especially when that [Inglenook] situation got bad. I didn't have anybody I could go to and say, "Look, I'm in a world of hurt here. These idiots at the bank are wrong, so how do I adjust?"

For instance, I was the first woman hired by the Bank of America in 1962 for their international managerial training program. The training officer in my program said, "Listen to me, Robin. When you finish this program you're not going overseas like all the men, because there is no place in international banking for a woman. You will not be an officer of the bank, because there is no place for...you know, as a matter of fact, we have no idea what we'll do with you when you finish this program. But Robin, know this: if you screw up, we will never put another woman in this program again."

I like to think we've made a lot of headway since that crazy time. Yet we're still at the base of the Alps in many ways. **So every step, every hurrah along the way is so important. And every outstretched hand is so valuable.**





photo credit: Caren Alpert

Photo: Courtesy of Napa County Historical Society



### Third Annual Napa Valley Wine Auction

June 18 and 19, 1983  
Meadowood, St. Helena, California



photo credit: unknown photographer, courtesy of Robin Lail

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### **Any mistakes you are comfortable sharing, when it comes to Lail Vineyards?**

I have made so many mistakes, but they are not in the farming world. I do happen to work with an absolutely outstanding farming company.

When I began Lail Vineyards, I also started another business called Connections, a destination management company. The idea was to attract people of power and influence, because you cannot have too many influential friends. I arranged extraordinary visits for extraordinary people, and yet it was very foolish. Not only was it consuming, but the hosts were upset with me if something went wrong or the guests didn't show up. Finally, a friend said to me, "What are you doing? You've invested your life in this wine business and you're out here playing destination management." Not paying full attention to my winery business at first was a huge mistake.

### **With so much written about you, is there anything you want to add that has not been fully communicated before?**

Well, since I'm only guilty of being born at the right place at the right time, it makes me smile when people attribute positive things about me. It is a fact that Lail Vineyards does not have the trappings of a "serious business," and yet, I'm so fiercely proud of what we're doing. It's not arrogance — it's just unmitigated passion. I am so blessed to be in this amazingly beautiful place and so lucky to go back to what I started with, that we had the temerity to try again. I'm far short of Inglenook. I'm clear about that, but this is Lail Vineyards. I'm so proud of my baby.

### **You've mentioned your father saw himself simply as a caretaker of a legacy and the property. He said to you many times as children, "All this will be yours one day."**

Right — don't say that to your babies, because no matter how much you mean those words, things don't always work out!

### **True, but I imagine most in the wine business secretly (or not so secretly) hope they leave something for posterity. Considering our audience includes many successful wine businesses, what are some thoughts to share as we weigh the possibilities of our own legacy?**

Yes, now it will depend on my girls. When we do events together, that comment I made about magic is so real. We're like this ball of burning fire. You can't block it. "Hi, here we come. Watch out!" So, that's what I want for my children. They carry the legacy — you bet they know darn well — and are proud that we made an effort and a comeback.

I think the future is created by example, by what you do, who you are, what you talk to your children about, what you expose them to. As a parent, all that we ever want more than anything, is to have them soar wherever they want. All you can do is, from the time they're little, is share...

### **Share some of that magic?**

It's all around you. You smell it, right? Come on. How can you not love that? You see the mustard. And then you see the little leaves coming. Oh, and those tiny, tiny little bunches of grapes. And then, you know, everybody gets all excited. Oh you see the crew out in the freezing cold. They're crazy, and they're cutting the canes. You're exposed to it, so it's part of your life. It is. There's no way you cannot have it in your heart.

This is the most unusual and the most forthright interview I've ever given. So, thank you.

**Martin Reyes** is the first Latin American Master of Wine in the world. His wine story began with an over-indulgent Parisian dinner as a Stanford undergrad and soon Martin was moving boxes at his local wine shop. In 2011, he became the principal buyer for national wine club programs including The New York Times and Williams-Sonoma and was named one of 2015 Wine Enthusiast's Top Forty under Forty Tastemakers. Today, Martin directs production for Sonoma-based Peter Paul Wines and heads Reyes Wine Group, a consulting resource whose clients have included Spottswoode Estate, Copa Fina Wine Imports, and Vivino.com. He works closely with Vice Versa Wines in Napa Valley and recently launched Reyes Selections, a small import company.



Courtesy of Martin Reyes