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ROBIN LAIL A LIFE IN NAPA

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“For Robin Lail, it’s not just a passion for wine. It’s a passion for who she is in this valley. She’s a part of it. She’s one of the treasures of this valley.”

—MOLLY CHAPPELLET, COVER STORY



40 Robin Lail

COVER STORY

40 Growing Up Napa The life of vintner Robin Lail traces the history of Napa Valley’s evolution as a wine region since the repeal of Prohibition. Daughter of California wine legend John Daniel Jr. of Inglenook, she worked with game-changers such as Robert Mondavi, Bill Harlan and Christian Moueix along a journey that has come full circle with the founding of her own family winery • *MaryAnn Worobiec*

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Robin Lail, shown here at work on her forthcoming memoir, has recently had time to reflect on the forces that shaped her trajectory as a guiding light of Napa Valley.



Creating Her Own Legacy

**After growing up
at Napa's storied
Inglenook estate,
Robin Lail blazed
an uncommon path
through the world
of California wine**

By MaryAnn Worobiec

Photographs by Alanna Hale

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ARABELLA JOY ABLAZA

Robin Lail

remembers lying among the mustard plants between the grapevines of Napa Valley's famed Inglenook estate in the late 1940s, gazing at the clouds. "My childhood at Inglenook was absolutely magical," she recalls.

On her way home from school, she'd stop by the winery. During harvest, the smells from the open-top fermentors were heady. "They were racy. They were promises," she says. Lail would nibble on wine grapes, but they were all bitter skins and seeds to her young palate.

Her father, John Daniel Jr., owner of Inglenook from 1936 to 1964, is considered one of the greatest winemakers in California history, with wines among the finest and longest-lived ever produced there. But although Lail wanted to follow in his footsteps, she didn't get the chance. After Daniel sold the winery, Lail worked with Napa superstars such as Robert Mondavi, Bill Harlan, Christian Moueix and Philippe Melka. Along the way, she both witnessed and was a backstage contributor to the development of Napa Valley. "I was in the center of it in kind of a funny way," she says.

Yet Lail, now 80, is humble about her role in Napa, noting that much of her work was behind the scenes. "Until I was 60, I really wanted to be John Daniel. I wanted to contribute to the wine industry. I wanted to be important," she admits. Asked if she thinks she's accomplished that, Lail blows raspberries with her mouth.

Lail may not take herself too seriously, but her fellow vintners are more generous. Molly Chappellet believes Lail has had a big impact on Napa. "It's not just a passion of wine for her. It's a passion for who she is in this valley," says Chappellet. "She's a part of it. She's one of the treasures of this valley. Of anywhere."

Tim Mondavi praises her hard work ethic and cites its effect on his family's winemaking legacy. "She's one of the best ambassadors of Napa Valley, having seen from experience the many faces of Napa, and having grown up at the crown jewel."

Lail's journey to find her place in the wine industry has been paved with ambition, grit, mentors that both challenged and inspired her, disappointments and hard lessons. "I don't know if it was luck or fate," Lail says of her path. "But it took a long time to get here."

Lail is tall and trim, and her signature bangs give her a youthful look. She has a smooth voice and a sly smile. She bounces between being wonderfully optimistic and comically cynical. She often slips into impressions of people she recalls.

Inglenook was an isolated and beautiful place to grow up, perfect for her free spirit. The estate was founded in 1879 by Lail's great-granduncle, Gustave Niebaum, a Finnish sea captain who made his fortune in the Alaskan fur trade. He built the massive stone château when he was in his late 30s. From the beginning, Inglenook wines were impressive; said to be the first in America sold in glass bottles instead of wooden casks, they earned gold medals at the World's Fair in Paris in 1889.

John Daniel Jr. inherited the property after Prohibition. He was among the first vintners to put "Napa Valley" on a wine label, and he pioneered varietal labeling and vintage-dated bottling. He helped set the quality standard for Napa wines in the post-Prohibition era.

Lail, born Robin Daniel, was very close with her father. "He was the best human on the planet, and I love him," she declares. Her sister, Marcia (nicknamed Marky), is five years her senior, so Lail became comfortable being a loner, finding secret places on the property to play Cowboys and Indians. Inside a tree house, she would write stories and doodle.

But her mother, Betty, was unhappy. When Lail was three, Betty left and remarried. Eventually that marriage ended in divorce and Betty returned to the family when Lail was seven, remarrying John. There was also a great deal of tension about the family business.



Clockwise from top: Robin Lail (right) with her father, John Daniel Jr., and sister, Marcia "Marky" Smith, in 1958; Lail (in white) with Robert Mondavi at the inaugural Auction Napa Valley in 1981; Lail with Bill Harlan in 1988

“I think I’d be such a different human if [Inglenook] was given to me. I’d never know if I could do it myself.”

—Robin Lail

Lail was allowed to smell wine at the dinner table, but Betty, a Mormon, was not a fan of the wine business, and John was discouraged from talking about it.

In this environment, it’s little wonder Lail wasn’t groomed to be her father’s successor. She went to Stanford, his alma mater. She majored in international relations and played tennis in college. She was 24 when her father sold the business to United Vintners in 1964.

The wine business wasn’t profitable for most wineries back then, and Daniel’s quest for perfection was pricey, including declassifying wines that didn’t meet his ideals. Explains Tim Mondavi, “Inglenook kept up the standards of fine wine, but the market wasn’t willing to pay for it.” Daniel made the move to sell secretly, not even telling his friend and mentee Robert Mondavi. Lail muses that Mondavi would have tried to purchase it had he known.

After the sale, her father went from respected industry leader to outsider. He became increasingly depressed, and in 1970 committed suicide. Betty Daniel sold off the rest of the properties, family possessions and heirlooms—down to the kitchen clock, remembers Lail. “It was a dark time.” But she and her sister were able to retain 125 acres, a vineyard known as Napanook.

Bitter and heartbroken, Lail decided it was time to move on. “When my dad sold the winery, I wanted zero to do with the wine business,” she says. “What could I do with one generation and no money? I had been part of the best of the best. The Lafite of Napa.”

She can’t help but wonder what it would have been like to carry on the legacy at Inglenook, though she speculates it might have spoiled her. “I think I’d be such a different human if it was given to me. I’d be entitled.” She pauses for a moment and adds, “I’d never know if I could do it myself.”

After graduating from Stanford, Lail worked at Bank of America in San Francisco, where she says she was the first woman in the management program, in the national and international research department. “I was always keenly aware of the fact that I was lesser; I was a woman,” she says, adding, “I knew

about putting forth a good idea and hearing it come out of someone else’s mouth standing behind you.” This phenomenon would recur later in her life, though Lail rejects the notion that she was anyone’s victim.

It was during this time that she met Jon Lail. They both lived in a San Francisco Victorian house that had been converted into apartments. She and her roommates, and Jon and his roommates, hung out at the Tadich Grill—San Francisco’s oldest restaurant—as a group before the two started dating. They married in 1966.

Jon, an architect, had a project in Napa, so they relocated there in 1972 and Robin found work for a volunteer center. In 1977, Robert Mondavi approached her with a job offer. She had known Mondavi since she was four; her father, who had been a mentor to him, is said to have bought the first case of Robert Mondavi wine off the bottling line. “Mr. Mondavi said, ‘I’d like you to come and work for me as a personal assistant,’” Lail recalls, adding under her breath, “I knew he meant secretary.”

Lail was 37 when she went to work for Mondavi. She saw him as a fountain of hope. “He was an optimist from start to finish,” she says. In retrospect, she surmises that some of this optimism was



Renowned consultant Philippe Melka (left) has worked alongside Lail as winemaker since Lail Vineyards’ inception in 1995.

directed at her specifically. “I believe he hired me to reignite my love of wine,” she explains.

Lail recalls the many “homilies” Mondavi liked to repeat, such as, “It’s a great life if you don’t weaken.” His speeches on the beauty of the region and quality of Napa wines had an effect on her. And she was fiercely loyal to her boss. “People always wanted a piece of the great man,” she says. “I became a self-styled protector.”

This was during the late 1970s and early ’80s, at the height of Mondavi’s influence; he was changing the way the world viewed Napa wines. In 1978, he forged a partnership with Bordeaux’s Baron Philippe de Rothschild of Château Mouton-Rothschild—then as now one of the world’s great estates—founding Opus One Winery

in Napa, a new benchmark (and price tag) for Napa Cabernet. Mondavi was in overdrive, constantly traveling or on the phone, and Lail was concerned that he needed to pace himself. She started to filter his phone calls. As a prank, Lail and a colleague had his desk phone removed and a pay phone booth installed in his office. Mondavi didn't get the joke, shouting out, "That's for the birds."

When invited to her first board of directors' meeting for Robert Mondavi Winery, Lail had comments on every topic that came up—a point Mondavi teased her about for years after. He was an exacting boss who emphasized double-checking all details and who would notice the smallest thing out of place, like a cigarette butt on the ground outside the offices.

The big picture mattered to Mondavi as well. When he started visiting wineries in France, says Lail, he would call on the great producers and ask them questions on vineyard and winemaking decisions. Vintners were kind and welcoming, but they were often taken aback by Mondavi's direct questions. "It was like asking your mother-in-law for the recipe for her famous chocolate cake," suggests Lail. "She'd give you the recipe, with the exception of the baking powder."

But Mondavi had a strategy, and he was tenacious. "They didn't realize he'd be back the next year to ask the same questions," explains Lail. "After three visits, he had a clear picture of how they were making wine."

While working for Mondavi, Lail got to know real estate developer Bill Harlan. In 1978, Harlan had purchased a modest Napa golf club called Meadowood with the idea of converting it into vineyards. Mondavi told him it wasn't a great site for grapes but might be perfect as a venue for a charity auction, something he and John Daniel Jr. had dreamed about decades earlier.

In 1980, Mondavi, Lail and Harlan traveled with a group of vintners to Bordeaux and Burgundy on a research excursion to imagine Napa's potential, visiting sites including the Hospices de Beaune charity wine auction as a reference point for what would become Auction Napa Valley.

On this trip, Harlan noted not only Lail's organizational skills, but also her way with people. "She understood protocols," Harlan says, and beyond that, she stood out for her social intelligence. "She knew a gracious way to be a guest, and how to be a host. She took all of these kinds of things to a different level."

Lail went to work for Harlan in 1982 at his real estate firm, Pacific Union, doing much of the same assistant work she had done for Mondavi, but also offering Harlan an insider's perspective and introductions as he increased his presence in Napa. "At certain times, I recognize people have more potential than they have thought about," explains Harlan. "I thought Robin had that potential. I always look for people that can do better than I can."

Lail agrees that Harlan encouraged her to be all she could be. But he was obsessive, a perfectionist and difficult to work for. The yellow legal pads around the office are among her lasting memories from that time period. On them, "Ideas kept repeating themselves and repeating themselves in his large handwriting," Lail describes. "[Harlan] has a vision and thinks about it, and turns it



The Lail clan: (from left) Robin's daughter Shannon Lail; Shannon's son, Lail Casten; Robin's daughter Erin Lail; Robin Lail; Robin's husband, Jon Lail; Shannon's daughter, Wells Casten; Shannon's husband, Bert Casten; and Erin's children, Georgia and Henry Dixon

around like a Rubik's Cube. He asks questions he already has the answers to."

One of the ideas on the legal pads, which Lail saw Harlan mull over for years, was that of the Napa Valley Reserve, an elite wine club for enthusiasts, which Harlan finally created in 2003.

Lail rose from personal assistant to vintner with two largely contemporaneous projects: Merryvale and Dominus.

Merryvale was Harlan's idea. He was interested in starting a wine company, and he knew Lail could help him run one. Together with John Montgomery and Peter Stocker, two of Harlan's colleagues from Pacific Union, they launched Merryvale in 1983. Lail was named president.

Wine was gaining momentum in the United States, and Napa



BONUS VIDEO: SPOTLIGHT ON ROBIN LAIL

Get up close and personal with the Napa vintner.

WineSpectator.com/RobinLailSpotlight



was evolving in new directions. “Virtual wineries” were popping up—brands without an “estate” but whose owners could buy grapes and hire winemakers to make wine at custom-crush facilities. Merryvale was one at first.

“We had no winery, no vineyards, no nothing—no story,” Lail explains. Merryvale wines were made from purchased grapes around Napa, first at Rombauer and later at the Sunny St. Helena facility where Mondavi had made his first wines and which Merryvale purchased in 1985.

Harlan says it was a learning experience for both himself and Lail, not just about the wine business, but about being an entrepreneur in a new sector. “To start on your own is a whole new world,” Harlan observes. “I’m sure [Lail] would have loved to own and run Inglenook, but she wasn’t left with that option.”

Lail agrees that Merryvale gave her a blueprint for building a wine business; the experience helped her realize it wasn’t necessary to design a wine brand around a single estate.

Another lesson from Merryvale? Never get into a minority partnership. “You may have great vision, but you do not have any control,” she explains. She started Merryvale as a 25% partner, but various cash culls over the years dropped her share down to just 2%.

As the original partnership began to dissolve in the 1990s, she recalls that Jack Schlatter, a Swiss businessman and newer partner in Merryvale, asked her if she would “consider continuing [in the role of president] until we find a man to run the company.” She ended up selling her interest in Merryvale in 1997, with Schlatter becoming the sole owner.

In 1981, while still working as Mondavi's assistant, Lail opened a letter that Christian Moueix, of famed Pomerol châteaux Pétrus and Trotanoy, had written to Mondavi. Moueix was curious about Mondavi's work with Leeuwin Estate in Australia. Lail went to pull the files, but they were nowhere to be found. At first, Lail panicked at the thought of having to re-create the missing documents for her exacting boss. But then, her mind went elsewhere.

Moueix was looking for a partnership. His letter mentioned that he couldn't find a suitable property in Napa, which was why he was considering Australia. Lail walked into Mondavi's office and planted the seed. "Don't you think rather than Christian going to Australia, it would be much more exciting to have him in Napa Valley?" She left his office, and a moment later heard him calling to her: "And yet—you have a vineyard." Her plan had worked. "Forever it was his idea," Lail says now.

Napanook was special, the last remaining piece of her family's legacy. Lail remembers driving with her father in a truck through the 125-acre vineyard in 1946. She brought her own daughters to the vineyard to play when they were growing up. Grapes from Napanook were sold to Napa wineries including Robert Mondavi Winery.

It was love at first sight for Moueix. "Visiting on a rainy day in 1981 with [winemaker] Daniel Baron, I told him



Above: Lail and her husband, Jon Lail
Left: Lail's Mole Hill Cabernet comes from a vineyard in front of her home on Howell Mountain.



invested \$1 million, which gave him a 50% share. Smith and Lail provided the grapes, for a 25% share apiece. "I thought this was it, this is where I'm going to make a new establishment based on two families. It will all be so exciting. I will not have to start over to bring my legacy into the 21st century." Lail pauses. "I was naive."

Moueix calls the partnership a happy one that ran its course after 13 years of working together. Lail says that as time

right away, "This is a jewel box; we shall one day produce a great wine on this ranch," recalls Moueix.

What was more, Lail and Moueix learned that they had a great deal in common. "Christian kept a diary of how many coincidences there were that pushed us together," Lail says. "It was fascinating." She recalls 126 different instances.

Moueix agrees: "It is true that there were many coincidences," he says. "The first was obviously both our connections with Bob Mondavi."

In 1982, Lail and her sister, Marky Smith, signed a joint partnership with Moueix in what would become Dominus. Moueix

went on, it became apparent Moueix's goal was to own the property outright. For Lail and Smith's part, Lail told *Wine Spectator* in 2001, "We decided we wanted our own winery." She and Smith sold their shares to Moueix in 1995.

Lail had imagined that Dominus was a chance to re-create Inglenook, but it was not to be. Yet the sale gave her the seed money to rekindle her family's legacy—this time without partners. Lail was 55, the same age her father had been when he'd sold Inglenook. She knew Mondavi had been 53 when he'd started his namesake winery. It felt like the right time.

Lail had a family meeting with Jon and their two daughters, Erin

LEFT: COURTESY OF ROBIN LAIL

and Shannon, with the idea to start a new winery. Erin and Shannon had never met their grandfather, but they grew up well aware of their mother's pride in her heritage. "She definitely has a passion for wine, but [her family's history] is in her blood. It almost gets stronger as she gets older," describes Erin.

"She loves this valley," adds Shannon. "But this was a big deal—all the other wine deals before were partnerships. This was different. As she'd say, there was no 'there' there. But she is a can-doer. It was no surprise."

In a departure from her own experience as the child of a vintner, Lail made sure that her daughters and their children would be invited to be part of the business. "I say we are six generations in the wine business," Erin explains.

But the Lails counted no winemakers among their ranks, and they needed one.

Lail had first met Philippe Melka at Dominus in 1991, when he was working as an intern. By the early 2000s, Melka would be one of Napa's top consulting winemakers, and today, he counts hundreds of outstanding wines and dozens of blue-chip clients to his credit, including Dana, Brand, Bryant, Seavey, Gemstone and Nine Suns. In those days, though, Melka didn't consider himself a winemaker.

Lail hired him anyway. Melka had said something that resonated with her: that he could make wine in a style she liked. "Trends weren't of interest to me," explains Lail, referring to the growing number of riper-style Napa Cabernets made in the 1990s. "I wasn't willing to give up the idea of elegance and finesse." She also liked the idea of calling the shots. She wanted to be involved in the vineyards and in the blending, and Melka was open to that. He was in.

"I give her a lot of praise for taking a risk on me—a little French guy without any education except for some experience [in Bordeaux]," says Melka. "We were both in a new situation. That's why we connected well." He says she's one of the rare owners he works with who successfully balances a traditional mindset with openness to new ideas.

Lail was finally in control, but things didn't click into place right away. In the mid-1990s, Napa's wine industry was growing rapidly, which meant dozens of new labels to compete with. Lail knew she was making distinctive wines, but she struggled to get attention.

She was also distracted. She had another business on the side, Connections, which arranged visits to Napa Valley for leaders of industry, politicians, artists. She ran both businesses side by side for 10 years, but Connections was consuming too much of her energy. "I learned a lot of lessons the hard way," she admits. "Here I learned that I wasn't focusing on what I needed to focus on."

She also had a perception problem. "People thought of me as a

"If you meet Robin, the wines make sense. They have power, finesse, charm and class."

—Philippe Melka

dilettante," she reflects. "People thought [Lail Vineyards] was a vanity project."

It wasn't. It took years, but finally the winery gained traction thanks to critical success. Lail now makes six wines for a total of 4,000 to 5,000 cases a year. The grapes come from 10 sites around

Napa, including the 2.5-acre Totem Vineyard—all that's left of her family's original estate, sliced out when Route 29 bisected the original Napanook vineyard.

The Mole Hill Cabernet Sauvignon comes from a 3-acre estate vineyard in front of Lail's home on Howell Mountain, at 1,700 feet of elevation with a western exposure. The wine's name comes from her father—he had made an in-house, parody wine called Mole Hill Red, with the tagline "A wine you will truly 'go fer'!"

Of all her wines, the first one Lail created and the most important to her is the J. Daniel Cuvée Cabernet Sauvignon. With this wine, she gets to tell her father's

story over and over. She describes the cuvée as a modern interpretation of the wines he used to make. "I wanted to make wines of great elegance and finesse, complexity and integration, with a wonderful finish and a degree of magic," she explains.

"If you meet Robin, the wines make sense," says Melka. "They have power, finesse, charm and class."

Despite the winery's successes, Lail notes that "a woman still has a long way to the top to be considered credible." She describes regular occurrences at consumer events in which people assume her husband is the winery's proprietor.

Lail is currently working on a memoir about her experiences in the Napa Valley wine world. It's scheduled for release late next year. The process has given her plenty of perspective on her life's path. "I'm strange," she muses. "I think we write business plans before we hit planet Earth."

Her business plan includes giving back to the community. Many know her as a driving force in creating the first Auction Napa Valley—a riff on John Daniel's and Robert Mondavi's vision. In 1981, the first auction was held at Meadowood, as Mondavi had suggested it should be. It has since become one of the nation's



Lail (center) with Christian Moueix and Lail's sister, Marky Smith, in 1986, four years after the three created a joint partnership to found Dominus Estate.

premier wine events, raising millions of dollars each year for local health care organizations.

Molly Chappellet says that early on, the event had no money, just plenty of ambition, and she credits Lail for its success. Chappellet wove picnic baskets out of grapevines softened in her hot tub and scoured stores for affordable, colorful tablecloths. It was a team effort, but “[Lail] made it happen,” declares Chappellet. “She’s a manager and a director without being obnoxious. She was our conductor.”

The event also rounded up a thousand local volunteers. “Robin brought the community together in a way it had never been before,” says Harlan.

Lail’s charity work has since expanded to environmental issues. In 2019, she was named U.S. representative for the Porto Protocol, a global organization launched by Adrian Bridge of Taylor’s Port. The organization has created a set of principles that encourage companies across industries to combat climate change.

Vintner Samantha Rudd knows Lail through her friendship with Rudd’s late father, Leslie Rudd. Rudd describes Lail as a magical person with a sharp wit, a sort of fairy godmother who would show up to give her advice or a pep talk when she needed it. “She knows what to say at the right time, exactly what you need to hear.” But Rudd also says Lail’s work ethic has kept Rudd on her toes. “She has high expectations of people.”

After John Daniel sold Inglenook to United Vintners, the property had its ups and downs. First, the estate was broken up and the name sold off to a succession of owners. Inglenook swelled to a multimillion-case brand, no longer an icon of quality but instead known for Inglenook Navalle, a mass-produced value wine sold in jugs. The legacy of Daniel’s wines became blurred.

In 1975, film director Francis Ford Coppola and his wife, Eleanor Coppola, purchased a section of the Daniel property and the old Niebaum mansion. Eleanor met Lail soon after moving in. “I realized, through a quirk of fate, that I was living in the home she grew up in and assumed would one day be hers,” says Eleanor, adding that she believes Lail’s story was defined by the times. “As her father prepared to retire, he could not envision a daughter being capable of carrying on his family’s wine.”



Lail founded Lail Vineyards in 1995 alongside her daughters Shannon (center) and Erin. The three remain partners in the venture.

Coppola spent decades reuniting the original vineyards as parcels went up for sale, acquiring the former winery in 1995. He first made wine under the Niebaum-Coppola brand, attaching his name to that of the founder. Later, he bottled under the Rubicon label. Finally, in 2011, Coppola purchased the Inglenook trademark, reuniting the name with the estate.

In 2012, Lail became an ambassador for Inglenook, which Eleanor says she does with grace. Lail admits that every once in a while, she’ll be on the property and will feel a twang of regret that it’s no longer in her family, but it’s rare. “I’m so proud of Francis and grateful to Ellie. He’s made something real,” she says. “What those places are, they are all parts of the fabric of my life. I’m not mournful.”

Lail acknowledges that “for two years after [Inglenook] was sold, it was a bitter loss.” But she can’t help but be the optimist about what lies ahead for Lail Vineyards. “You can’t go forward if you’re busy looking back,” she reflects. “My love affair is here. My Inglenook is here. It’s just more humble.” □