

WINE ENTHUSIAST

The Making of Wine Enthusiast's No.1 Wine of 2020

BY VIRGINIE BOONE



Courtesy of Lail Vineyards

It's satisfying when good things happen to great people. And so, it's gratifying on several levels that the [Lail 2017 Blueprint Cabernet](#) would be honored as *Wine Enthusiast's* top wine of 2020.

The winery is helmed by Robin Daniel Lail, one of the finest people in the wine business. She's a true survivor of its ups and downs, a study in how slow and steady can sometimes surpass noisy trends.

The ability to see past flash is an important part of *The Enthusiast 100*. The list ranks the very best of the 25,000 bottles tasted annually by our team of global experts.

A Napa Valley native, Lail is the great-grandniece of Gustave Niebaum, who founded [Inglenook Winery](#) in Rutherford in 1879. She's also the daughter of John Daniel Jr., who came to the burgeoning wine region in 1914 to live at Inglenook.



Shannon, Robin and Erin Lail / Courtesy of Lail Vineyards

After Prohibition, Daniel returned Inglenook to glory. He produced a line of **Cabernet Sauvignons** that won awards worldwide, including at San Francisco's Golden Gate International Exposition, which celebrated the completion of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Some years were better than others.

Those not-so-good years included Inglenook's sale to United Vintners in 1964, and its subsequent purchase by Heublein five years later. The once-grand name devolved into a jug-wine brand for many years. That's until 1994, when famed movie director Francis Ford Coppola came along to revive it again.

Still, Lail's direct link to Inglenook was broken. Instead, she rolled up her sleeves and worked alongside some of **Napa's** new-era pioneers, including her mentor, Robert Mondavi, as well as Christian Moueix, with whom she co-founded Dominus Winery. There's also Bill Harlan, with whom she co-founded Merryvale Vineyards.

Every nuance is fine-tuned into a cohesive whole. The dominant blue fruit is refined and opulent, with supple tannin and well-integrated oak.

Decades ago, she sold her portions of both partnerships to pursue her own path. In 1995, she launched Lail Vineyards with her two daughters, which continued her family's ties to the Napa Valley. She was the first to hire Bordeaux-trained winemaker Philippe Melka as a consultant to help craft Lail's wines. That partnership continues to this day.

Lail has learned the intricacies of what it takes to achieve excellence through years of determination and application. This is no fly-by-night success. And that's what makes it all the better to see it one of Lail's bottlings become *Wine Enthusiast's* top wine.

It took years of farming improvements, fine-tuning in the cellar and blending trials to reach this level of excellence and beauty. It's even more impressive in what's seen as a tough vintage, nurtured amid the heat and fire of the 2017 growing season.



Courtesy of Lail Vineyards

Made by Melka and his team, the Blueprint Cabernet is sourced from Lail's three-acre, Mole Hill Estate that sits 1,700 feet above sea level on Howell Mountain, as well as other vineyard sites across the valley.

With 11% Merlot and 6% Petit Verdot, it shows a tremendous amount of blending skill of not only of varieties, but of sites. Every nuance is fine-tuned into a cohesive whole. The dominant blue fruit is refined and opulent, with supple **tannin** and well-integrated oak.

The wine is called Blueprint as a nod to Lail's husband, Jon Lail, an architectural designer whose work dots the Napa Valley landscape. It also honors her work with the Proto Protocol, a global initiative on climate action, yet another testament to her greatness.