Lail Vineyards

What does a young girl raised a Mormon in California wine country grow up to be? Why a world-class vintner, of course! Well, if you're Robin Daniel Lail you do. I'm tempted to call her California wine "royalty." That is if she wasn't so irresistibly down-to-earth! Robin is the great, great grandniece of Gustav Niebaum, the Finnish sea captain who built the historic Inglenook Estate in Napa Valley in 1879, and the daughter of legendary Napa Valley pioneer, John Daniel. If you think growing up part of a winemaking dynasty would be "difficult shoes" to fill, you'd be right. But fifth generation Robin Lail jumped in with both feet, and in the annals of wine lore, seems destined to become an iconic wine figure in her own right.

No newcomer to quality grape growing and winemaking in the unique viticultural corner of the world they call Napa Valley, Robin Lail is every bit the trailblazer as her ancestors. As a twenty-something back in the 1960's, she watched as her father was forced to sell Inglenook, leaving Robin and her sister a 140 acre vineyard site in Yountville, but no winery. Over the next decade or so, she became Robert Mondavi's Executive Assistant, went on to co-found Dominus with Chateau Petrus' Christian Moueix and then Merryvale Vineyards with Bill Harlan. In Robin's spare time, she was a Founder of Napa Valley Vintners and served as the first Director of the Napa Valley Wine Festival. But wait, there's more! In between she established her namesake Lail Vineyards.

I had an opportunity to spend some time with Robin at a recent luncheon and taste through the current lineup of wines from the Vail portfolio - four in number, two cabernet blends and two stylistically diverse sauvignon blancs.

Winemaker Phillipe Melka, a Bordeaux alumni of first growth Chateau Haut Brion, makes both the reds and whites calling on his French roots. An academic and an artist in the vineyard, he holds degrees in enology, geology and viticulture from the University of Bordeaux.

We started with the 2008 *Blueprint Sauvignon Blanc*, a Sancerre-style white made from a single riverside vineyard south of St. Helena. First fermented in new French oak before finishing in stainless, I found the wine adopted a rich, almost creamy note, highlighting melon and citrus flavors, It proved to be an ideal pairing with a goat cheese appetizer. Only a little over six hundred cases were produced.

Lail's current red wine lineup includes their inaugural *2006 Blueprint* (whimsically named to recognize acclaimed Napa architect Jon Lail, Robin's husband) and their flagship, *J. Daniel Cuvee* honoring Robin's father.

The *Blueprint* red*,* a blend of 85% cabernet and 15% merlot was created in response to market demand for a high-quality, value-packed Napa cabernet*.* With earthy sage notes and a core of dark fruit flavors, the soft tannins and hint of sweetness served as a perfect accompaniment to our Spicy Short Ribs. Immediately accessible, the wine has sufficient structure to enjoy over the next five to seven years. There are few Napa cabs that will provide this kind of experience for under $50, but *Blueprint* is certainly one of them.

The flagship *J. Daniel Cuvee,* from the heralded 2005 Napa vintage, is a hundred percent cabernet that is beautifully balanced and layered with intense espresso, licorice, cocoa and black cherry flavors. This is a a powerhouse cab from a vintage that tended to produce ultra-ripe fruit. Not so with this one. All the components, the integrated fruit, powerful tannins and the balanced acidity convey Melka's Bordeaux heritage while complementing his mastery of Napa Valley premium fruit. A definitive *Collector's Corner* selection.

After this triumvirate of stellar wines, I didn't expect the fourth and final selection of the tasting to be my hands down favorite. Don't get me wrong, the Loire-like Blueprint sauvignon and the pair of cabernets are incredible wines. But a week later, *Georgia* is still on my mind! One hundred percent sauvignon blanc from two parcels in the cooler, lower part of Napa Valley, an explosion of creamy tropical and stone fruit aromas burst from the glass. Layer upon layer of

silky-textured, complex flavors linger on the palate for a full minute or more. Every adjective imaginable could be used to describe this wine, but the one I kept coming back to - stunning!

This is, or should be, the benchmark for barrel-aged sauvignon blanc in America. Only 200 cases of *Georgia,* named for Robin's sixth generation granddaughter, were produced.

Lail Vineyard wines are all small production and may be difficult to find outside of the country's top restaurant wine lists, but I believe there is a rare opportunity to get on their mailing list. Sign up on line at https://www.lailvineyards.com or call the winery @ 707.968.9900.