

Michael Chiarello

with Janet Fletcher

Photographs by Steven Rothfeld

stewart, tabori & chang
new york



MICHAEL CHIARELLO

Napa Stories

PROFILES,
REFLECTIONS
& RECIPES

from the
NAPA VALLEY

Araujo Estate

Bart and Daphne

To my eye, Araujo Estate is one of the most picturesque properties in the Valley. The buildings aren't grand or grandiose. There's no reproduction French château, no dramatic architectural statement. Instead, there's something purely Californian

about what Bart and Daphne Araujo have built at the northeast end of the Valley: A new redwood winery that snuggles up against the hillside and echoes the lines of the adjacent century-old barn; a long drive lined with olive trees and stone walls; a well-tended but relaxed vegetable garden with quince and peach trees and espaliered pears . . . buildings and a landscape in harmony.

What has impressed me about the Araujos (apart from their impeccable wines) is how quickly they have made their mark. In 1990, as newcomers here, they bought the prestigious Eisele Vineyard, thirty-five acres of mostly Cabernet Sauvignon that Milt Eisele planted. Joseph Phelps made Eisele Vineyard famous by putting its name on bottles of Phelps Cabernet Sauvignon for fifteen years.

By the end of the nineties, Araujo Estate "Eisele Vineyard" Cabernet was on everyone's list of "cult" wines—wines with small production, high ratings, and long waiting lists. The Araujos make only about twenty-five hundred cases of Cabernet, and about five hundred cases each of Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc—all from their own grapes and all identified on the label as Araujo Estate "Eisele Vineyard." They're so committed to controlling every aspect of production that they own their own bottling line—an extravagance for a winery their size. (Most small wineries use a mobile bottler, a company that brings the necessary equipment and workers to the winery at bottling time.)

Both of them left successful careers—Bart in home building and mortgage banking, Daphne in landscape architecture—to launch this risky winery venture, and I wanted to know why.

Bart: I had sold my former business in Southern California and I wanted to move back home. I had grown up in Burlingame (near San Francisco), which was the country in those days, so my vision of going home was to go back



BART AND DAPHNE ARAUJO

to the country but still be close to San Francisco. And the only places with that potential were Napa and Sonoma. So our decision was really geographic. It didn't have to do with wine, at least at first.

We spent about four years looking for property. We finally found something that we liked about five miles south of here, and we were quite happy with it. But in the course of our search, in 1986 through 1989, we'd become aware that some of the treasured vineyard properties in the Napa Valley were, shall we say, underutilized. So we told our real estate agents to call us if any of the great historical properties ever became available. And they did—about two months later. I was figuring it might be ten years later.

The real estate agents Jean Phillips and Ren Harris (who have their own Napa Valley wineries Screaming Eagle and Paradigm, respectively) brought the Araujos some interesting news: The famous Eisele Vineyard was for sale.

We told our agent to call us if any historical properties became available. And they did—about two months later.

Bart: Everyone felt that Joseph Phelps was going to acquire it, and since he'd had an exclusive relationship with the grapes since 1975, none of the locals wanted to upset the apple cart. But Joe, for whatever reason, chose not to acquire it. So we were Jean's second phone call. And we didn't let her make the third.

Acquiring Eisele wasn't just acquiring a vineyard. It was acquiring a piece of Napa Valley history. As far as we can verify, the property has been continuously in grapes since 1886, which is unusual here.

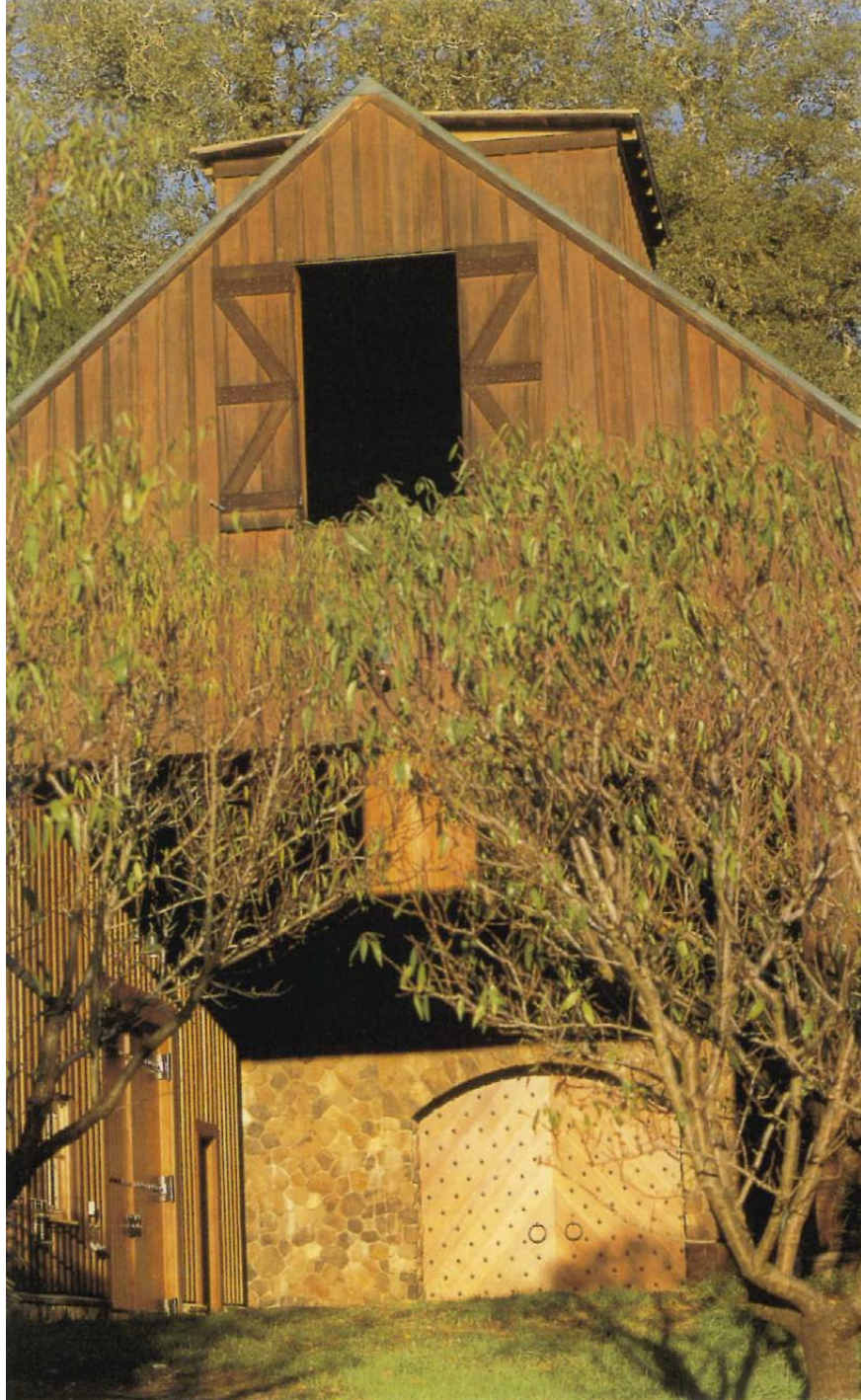
It also produced one of the first vineyard-designated Cabernets in California. The only two that pre-date it to my knowledge are Ridge Monte Bello and Heitz Martha's Vineyard. And that was in an era when vintners designated the vineyard because the wine was unique, not just to increase the price.

We fell in love with the idea of being stewards of this very special property. Our view is that we have a treasure, a little jewel, and it's our tremendous responsibility to preserve and improve it.

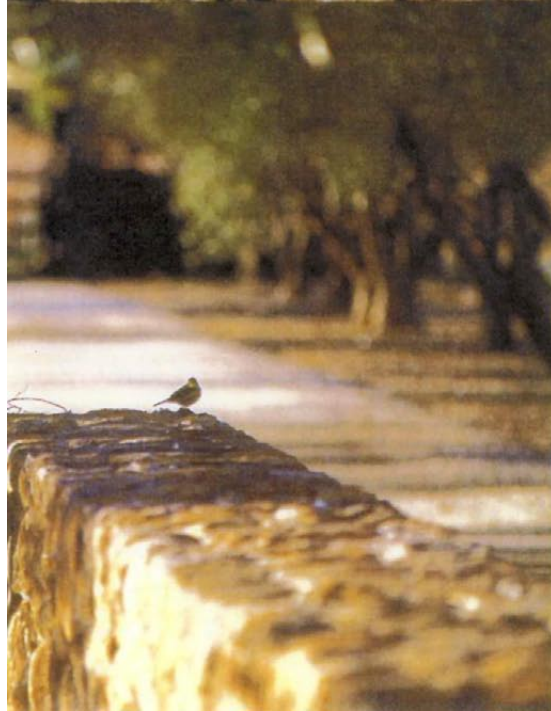
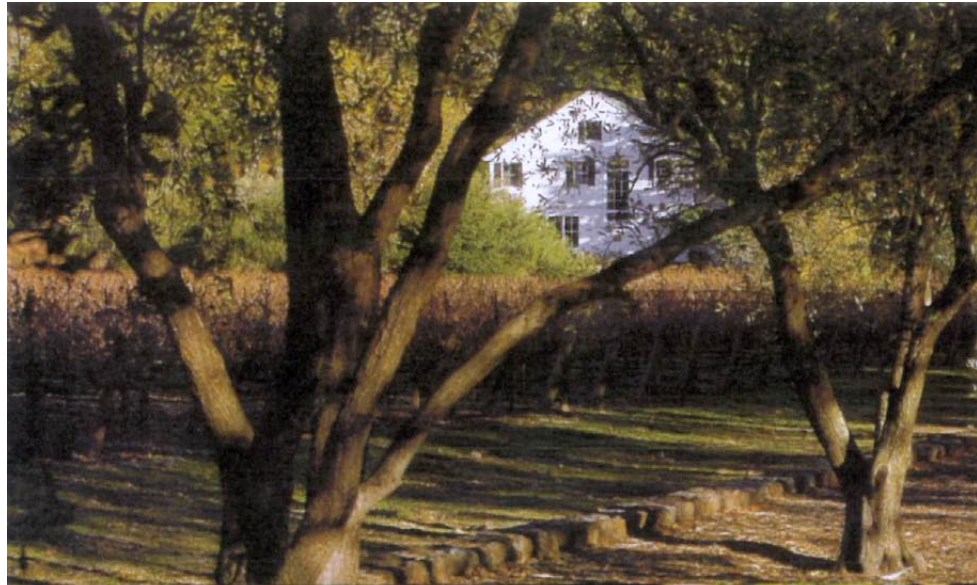
Daphne: Our intent was to have a vineyard. But before we even closed escrow, Bart realized that it was important to also make the wine, to control the whole process from beginning to end. So, effectively, we entered two businesses about which we knew very little.

If we wanted a winery, we had to act quickly. Mill Eisele had seen clearly that it was going to get harder to get a winery permit, not easier. He had obtained a permit for a small winery, but we had to act within a certain time. My recollection is that we closed escrow in May and had until the end of June to perfect the permit.

That's a huge decision to make quickly. Starting a winery means years of capital investment with no return. You need a winemaking staff, a sales and marketing staff, a winery building with hundreds of thousands of dollars in equipment for crushing, pressing, fermenting, and aging. Even a small winery is not a small investment.



The redwood winery
at Araujo Estate.



Daphne: The Eiseles had introduced us to a lot of people in the Valley, and they all said, "Whatever you do, don't start a winery." And I said, "Well, you know, we've pretty much decided we're going to do that." And they said, "Well, then, whatever you do, don't make your winery too big because we've seen so many people we care about come and start a winery, and it all seems so easy and fun, and then they're doubling and tripling the size, and it isn't fun anymore."

So we decided that it was appropriate to have a winery, but a small winery based fully on the estate. We would not buy grapes from others. We would just concentrate on what we grow here.

For the winery, Milt had designated this two-car corrugated-metal garage with about eight-foot ceilings. We thought it was fine, but what did we know? When we started interviewing winemakers, we would point out the garage and say, "Here's the winery," and they all looked at us like we were crazy. They said, "You can't make wine in there."

So the Araujos built a winery, a beautiful redwood barnlike winery that looks like it has always been there. They dug caves into the hillside to keep the wines cool during barrel aging. And they went looking for people who could help them aim for greatness. Of course, everyone wanted to get their hands on the Eisele fruit and they had their pick of consultants. In the end, they hired Tony Soter (see page 164) as consulting winemaker and David Abreu as viticulturist. Tony has since retired from consulting, but his protégé, Françoise Peschon, is the Araujos' winemaker now.

The Eisele vineyard had been a star for years, but in 1990, it was showing its age. In some ways, the Araujos realized, buying Eisele was like buying a vintage sports car: It might be a thrill to own, but it would need lots of work to bring it back to peak performance.

Daphne: We had a sense when we bought the vineyard that it was time to replant, and of course, that was one reason that Milt and Barbara decided to sell. At their ages, it wasn't a time to put yet more capital into the vineyard.

The vine spacing was pretty wide and the infrastructure—the vineyard trellising and irrigation—was old. Also, there were a lot of vines that had once been something else but had been budded over to Cabernet over the years. And one could argue that they weren't first-class vines because they had been budded over.

Bart: So we replanted the Eisele clone on phylloxera-resistant rootstocks with the increased vine densities that David and Tony felt were more appropriate. We added Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot (varieties often blended with Cabernet Sauvignon), which had never been planted here before. We started an estate white wine program with Sauvignon Blanc, and then subsequently began to experiment with another noble red—Syrah.

Finding Syrah at Eisele Vineyard was a complete surprise. When the Araujos bought the property, they thought they were buying a Cabernet vineyard.

Bart: In 1991, just before harvest, Tony and I were walking through one of our older Cabernet blocks. I said, "Tony, what's wrong with that vine there? The Cabernet clusters don't look right." He looked at me and said, "That's Syrah. What's Syrah doing here in block six?"

*Didn't it make the
Araujo nervous to make
so many changes to a
proven vineyard?*

I called Milt and said, "Milt, did you know you had Syrah in block six?" And he said, "Oh, did I forget to tell you?"

Joe Phelps had been so pleased with the Eisele Cabernet that when he started making Rhône varietals in the late 1970s, he wanted to do a vineyard-designated Syrah from Eisele. So he convinced Milt to plant seven-and-a-half acres out of thirty-five—a significant portion of the vineyard—to Syrah. When the Rhône program didn't really take off [Phelps would try again later with Rhône varietals and succeed], he encouraged Milt to bud the Syrah over to Cabernet.

For whatever reason, about a hundred of the vines hadn't taken the graft and were still Syrah. So we just harvested it separately and made the wine. And the wine was so extraordinary, it encouraged us to plant more Syrah.

I had to wonder if it didn't make the Araujos nervous to make so many changes to a proven vineyard. Didn't they worry about messing with success?

Daphne: I said something to Joe Phelps early on about replanting, about whether that didn't seem risky. And he just laughed. He said the quality is in the ground, and we needed to replant. It was time. And our timing was good because it really was the beginning of a whole revolution in the way things were planted, and people understood enough of AxR-1 not to plant it anymore. [AxR-1 was a widely planted rootstock that proved susceptible to phylloxera.] I don't think we talked to anyone who knew the vineyard who didn't feel it was the right thing to do. So that gave us confidence.

I had been thinking a lot about the Araujos' commitment to estate-grown fruit—making wine only from grapes you grow yourself. In some ways, it reminds me of my efforts as a chef to control my ingredients as much as possible. When I couldn't find mozzarella or prosciutto I liked for Tra Vigne, I made them myself. Whether you're a chef or a winemaker, you're only as good as your raw materials.

Vintners these days are more eager to own their own grapes so they can dictate how they're grown and harvested. And they're more attuned to the nuances of each site. When your wine comes from a single vineyard, you have a chance to "taste the place"—to understand what that particular patch of dirt can do.

Daphne: When Tony was our consulting winemaker, he would gather his clients together once a year or so for a tasting. Since we all had the same winemaker, what showed through very clearly in each wine was the voice of the soil: a distinctive character that cannot be copied or reproduced in any other location.

People who are knowledgeable in wine and taste a lot can always find this. Take Barney Rhodes, for example. He was always too modest to say so, but his wife, Belle, would say he was one of the great tasters of the world. You'd give him a bottle blind and he could tell you the producer, the vineyard, and the vintage.

It's that voice that makes having an estate so exciting. Everything we're doing here is trying to eliminate the external influences to make the voice more pure. We compost our own grape pomace and grow our own cover crops and till them into the soil so we're not importing so many amendments. At some point, it would be wonderful to have our

own cows, so even the manure would come from the property. I think the more pure the voice becomes, the more interesting the wine can be, especially given that we have a multitude of different growing areas on our forty acres.

So what is the "voice" of an Araujo Cab? I wanted to hear the Araujos describe their wine in their own words.

Daphne: Well, it tends to be more black fruit than red, such as black currant, blackberry, black cherry. Then there's a wonderful mineral note because the soil's extremely rocky. And there are some very deep roasted tones: some roast coffee, roast tobacco, cigar box.

Bart: My descriptors are a little different than Daphne's, but primarily, it's not as fruit-driven as most Napa Cabernets, whether they're benchland or mountain Cabernets. I find red and black currant, black cherry, chocolate. There's always major chocolate in there. Cedar tones that develop over time into fabulous saddle leather or cigar box. And there are some underlying herbal tones that Beth Novak at Spottswoode claims come from our olive trees. It's a very distinct signature.

It couldn't have been easy for the Eiseles to give up a vineyard that had their name on it and that had so much history and reputation.

Daphne: They loved this property so much. I remember when we first met them, we were in escrow but still hadn't really seen the house. Jean said, "Let's go up and have a look," and it happened to be on Milt's eightieth birthday. I mean, what horrible timing. We didn't know it until we walked in the door, and there they were with their children to help Milt celebrate. Barbara is very disarming. We walked in the door and she looked at us and said, "So what are you going to do with us?"

After the sale, they stayed in the house for over two years. I could tell it was difficult to make the transition from owning the property to not owning it. Milt used to watch very carefully what we were doing in the vineyard, and he liked what he saw. So they decided that we were okay, and what we were doing with the vineyard was okay, and the fact that we were going to continue to call our property the Eisele Vineyard meant a lot to them, so I think that made them comfortable introducing us around.

The Araujos' mission statement makes their intentions clear. Here's part of it: "To develop and operate a world-class wine-growing estate. To produce organically grown fruit and with this fruit make a singular wine of the highest caliber and distinction [that expresses] the uniqueness of the precious resource that is Eisele."

Bart and Daphne told me about one vintage where a large block of Cabernet had to be picked on a very hot day, and the wine made from those grapes took a long time to come around. It represented about 25 percent of the harvest, so leaving it out of the final blend was almost out of the question. But when Tony and Françoise did the blending trials and the Araujos realized the blend would be better without the wine from that block, they didn't hesitate.

*The more pure
the voice of the soil, the
more interesting the wine.*

Daphne: We had a similar conversation with Françoise when we decided not to declare the 1997 Syrah. We felt that the vintage didn't live up to our requirements and that we shouldn't bottle the wine. It may be expensive if you look at the bottom line for that year, but in the long term, the only way to preserve the brand is to make the right decision every year. Because the moment people can't trust what's in the bottle with your name on it, that's really expensive.

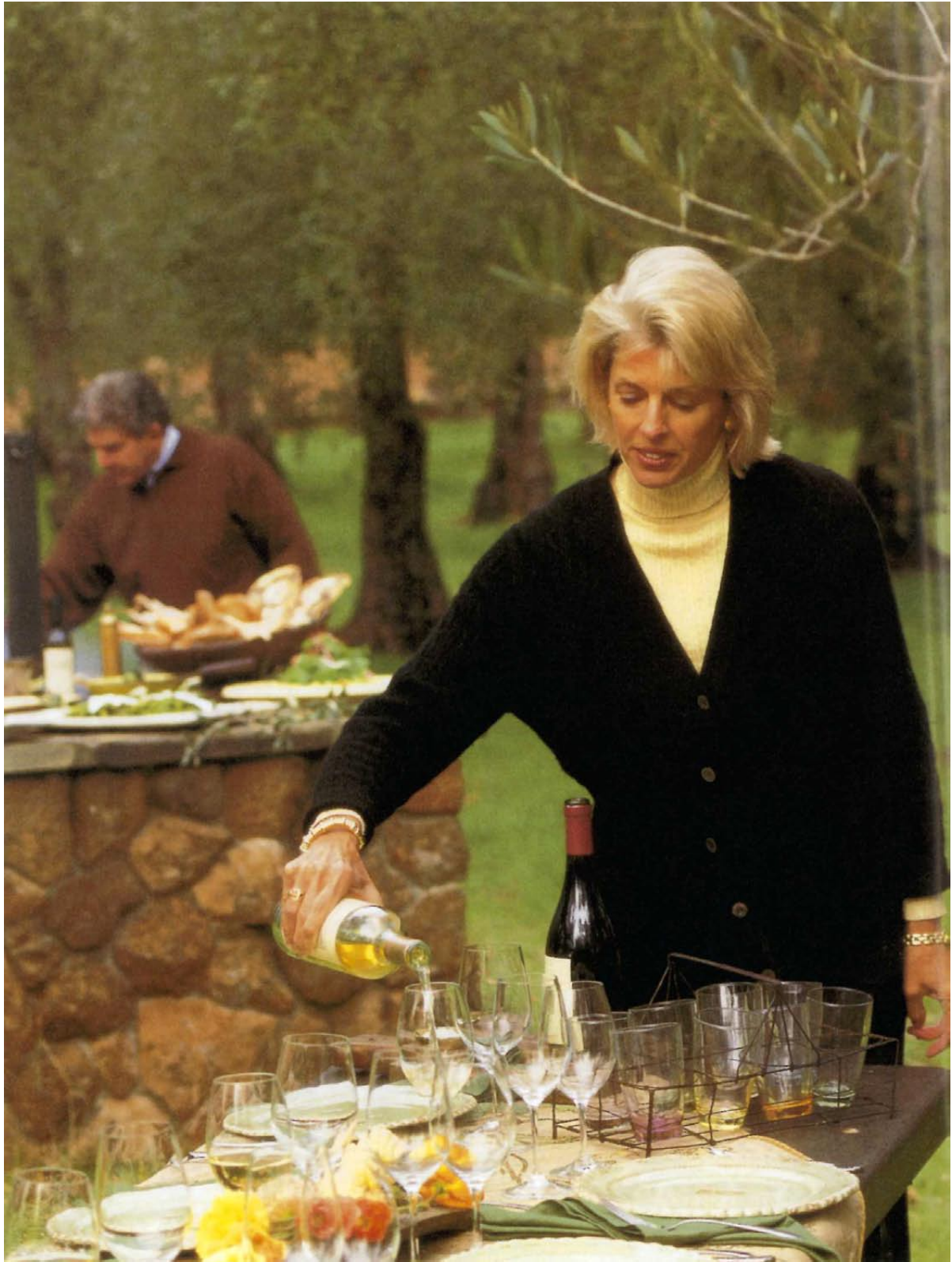
Could this attitude be the difference between a good winery and a great one? I'm starting to think that management philosophy may be just as important as the source of your grapes.

Bart: We tell our people that we don't want any compromises—in any aspect of the business. Nor do we want to think that we can be 100 percent better than anyone. We want to try to be 1 percent better in a hundred different ways. If you think you can get 100 percent better than others, you start developing arrogance that can sidetrack you. Better to start thinking about what can be done 1 percent better.

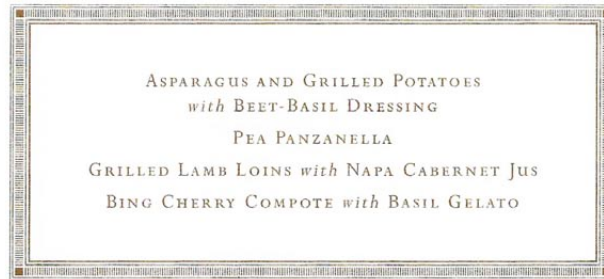
The Araujos have experienced extraordinary success in such a short time. Is there anything more they could want from the valley, anything they would change?

Daphne: My background makes me sensitive to the land, and I've often thought that there aren't nearly enough people who speak for it. I think we have to be more careful than we have been about preserving a thing of real beauty that people have written about ever since they first saw it. It's our turn now. We don't have Jack Davies anymore. [Jack was an outspoken advocate for slow growth in the Napa Valley. See page 70.] It's a new generation, and who among us is standing up and saying, What is the proper scale of any development that does occur? Don't we want to be proud of how we leave the Valley for the next generation?

I think there are some special places in the world and, clearly, Napa Valley is one of them. I think we have to speak up for it and maybe give up some personal things for the community to survive as a beautiful and productive place



Lunch in the Olive Grove



***S**or a chef, the busiest time in the Valley is the week of the Napa Valley Wine Auction—always the first weekend in June. Restaurants are even more jammed than usual, and wineries host events that draw on all the local culinary talents.*

I've had the pleasure and honor of preparing auction-week lunches a couple of times for Bart and Daphne Araujo and their winery guests. On both occasions, I aimed for a menu that would really showcase their wines and other bounty from the estate.

One year, we started the lunch with Araujo Estate Sauvignon Blanc and a warm potato and asparagus salad with Araujo Estate olive oil. To accompany their elegant Cabernet Sauvignon, I roasted lamb loins on the stone grill in their olive grove and served them with a Cabernet jus and a spring pea panzanella. Dessert was inspired by Daphne's garden: gelato infused with June basil and surrounded by warm Bing cherries.



ASPARAGUS AND GRILLED POTATOES *with* BEET-BASIL DRESSING

When I made this dish for the Araujos, I used their wonderful estate extra virgin olive oil on the potatoes. Because the potatoes cooked slowly, they really absorbed the oil flavor. Be sure to use the best olive oil you have, and note that you'll need a juicer to make beet juice. The beet dressing is unlike anything you have ever tasted.

4 medium russet potatoes,
unpeeled, sliced ½-inch thick
Approximately 1½ cups extra virgin olive oil
12 sprigs of fresh thyme
8 garlic cloves, peeled
Sea salt, preferably gray salt (see Note on page 26)
Freshly ground black pepper

Prepare a medium-hot charcoal fire and preheat oven to 325° F. When the coals are covered with gray ash, toss the potato slices with a little of the olive oil, then grill them about 5 minutes on each side to mark them. Put them in a baking pan large enough to hold them in a single layer. (You may need more than one.) Add enough olive oil to come one-third of the way up the sides of the potatoes. Scatter the thyme and garlic cloves over the potatoes, season with salt and pepper, and bake until tender, about 20 minutes. Let potatoes cool in the pan. You can bake them several hours ahead.

Simmer the beet juice in a saucepan until reduced to ½ cup. Watch carefully; the juice may want to boil up and overflow. Add the 1 tablespoon lemon juice and continue simmering until volume is reduced to ½ cup.

2 cups beet juice (from 6 large red beets)
1 tablespoon lemon juice, plus more
for the asparagus
½ cup basil oil, or extra virgin olive oil
2 pounds jumbo asparagus, woody ends removed
Ricotta salata cheese
Edible flowers or herb blossoms for garnish, optional

Strain into a bowl; when cool, whisk in basil oil. The dressing will not emulsify; it is meant to be “broken.” Season with salt and pepper. Boil asparagus in a large quantity of salted water until just tender, about 3 minutes. Drain, shock in ice water, then pat dry. Dress the asparagus lightly with some of the herb oil that floats to the top of the dressing. Season with salt, pepper, and a squeeze of lemon juice.

Make a bed of potato slices in the center of each plate. Stack a bundle of asparagus on top of the potatoes. With a cheese plane or vegetable peeler, shave ricotta salata over each portion. Shake or whisk dressing, then spoon some over the cheese. Garnish with edible flowers or herb blossoms, if using.

SERVES 8





PEA PANZANELLA

Sometimes I like to take a familiar dish that people understand and present it in a way they couldn't imagine. In most kitchens, panzanella is a summer bread salad with tomatoes, garlic, and basil. But why not rethink the bread salad idea for other seasons? This pea panzanella is a celebration of spring. Once you become familiar with this recipe, you can make seasonal variations of your own. The vitamin C in the dressing helps preserve its bright green color.

½ cup unsalted butter
3 tablespoons chopped garlic
6 tablespoons minced fresh basil
3 tablespoons minced fresh thyme
1 pound day-old country bread in ½-inch cubes (remove crust if hard)
Sea salt, preferably gray salt (see Note on page 26)
Freshly ground black pepper
½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
½ cup freshly grated pecorino romano cheese

Preheat oven to 375° F. Turn on the convection fan if you have one.

Heat the butter in a skillet over moderate heat until it begins to brown. Add the chopped garlic and stir briefly to release its fragrance. Remove from the heat and add the minced basil and thyme. Stir to combine. Pour the butter mixture over the bread cubes in a bowl and toss briskly so butter coats the cubes evenly. Season with salt and pepper and stir in the two cheeses. Place the bread cubes on a baking sheet, scraping all the seasonings over them. Bake until lightly browned but still soft, about 12 minutes. Transfer to a bowl to cool along with any of the bits sticking to the baking sheet.

For the dressing:

1½ cups fresh or frozen peas
½ cup heavy cream
¼ teaspoon powdered vitamin C (ascorbic acid)
½ cup chicken stock, plus more for moistening the salad
¼ cup extra virgin olive oil

⅔ cup thinly sliced scallion greens
1½ cups cooked peas
½ cup grated pecorino toscano cheese
3 tablespoons lemon juice
1 tablespoon grated lemon zest

6 cups spring greens lightly dressed with extra virgin olive oil, lemon juice, and salt

Make the dressing: If using fresh peas, blanch them for 30 seconds in boiling water, then shock in ice water. Drain. If using frozen peas, defrost according to package. In a stainless steel saucepan, simmer peas in cream until the cream is hot, then puree in a blender or food processor with the vitamin C. Cool the puree, then whisk together with chicken stock and olive oil. Season with salt and pepper.

In a large bowl, combine toasted bread cubes, scallions, peas, pecorino toscano, lemon juice, and lemon zest. Add the dressing and toss well, adding a little more broth if panzanella seems dry. Put the ring from a 10-inch springform pan upside down on a large plate. Fill with panzanella, pressing it into place. Let stand for 30 minutes to 1 hour, then remove the ring. Mound the dressed spring greens lightly on the panzanella.

SERVES 8

GRILLED LAMB LOINS *with* NAPA CABERNET JUS

It may seem extravagant to simmer two bottles of good wine and eight cups of stock down to two cups of sauce, but great ingredients yield great results. And if you're going to the expense of treating your guests to lamb loins, you want a sauce that shows it off. Ask your butcher to remove the silverskin, the fine membrane that covers each loin.

For the lamb stock:

4 pounds lamb bones, in 2- to 3-inch pieces
(ask your butcher to cut them)
2 cups coarsely chopped onion
1 cup coarsely chopped carrot
1 cup coarsely chopped celery
4 sprigs fresh thyme
12 sprigs fresh parsley
1 teaspoon black peppercorns
1 teaspoon juniper berries
3 bay leaves

Make the lamb stock: Preheat oven to 375° F. Turn on convection fan, if you have one. In a roasting pan, roast the lamb bones, turning occasionally, for 1 hour, then add the chopped onion, carrots, and celery. Roast 20 minutes longer, stirring occasionally. Transfer bones and vegetables to a stockpot. Add thyme, parsley, peppercorns, juniper, bay leaves, and 1½ gallons of water. Bring to a simmer, skimming any foam. Adjust heat to maintain a bare simmer and cook for 8 hours. Strain.

For the jus:

3 tablespoons olive oil
½ pound lamb stew meat, fat trimmed, in 1-inch cubes
2 cups chopped onion
1 cup chopped celery
1 cup chopped carrot
6 sprigs fresh thyme
6-inch sprig fresh rosemary
1 bay leaf
2 bottles (750-ml. each) Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon
2 quarts hot lamb stock

3 pounds well-trimmed lamb loins
Extra virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons minced fresh thyme
Sea salt, preferably gray salt (see Note on page 26)
Freshly ground black pepper

Make the jus: Heat oil in a large pot over moderately high heat. Add lamb stew meat and brown well on all sides. Remove with a slotted spoon and set aside. Add onion, celery, and carrot and sauté until vegetables are well caramelized, about 15 minutes. Drain vegetables in a sieve, discard the fat, and return lamb and vegetables to pot along with thyme, rosemary, and bay leaf. Raise heat to high. Add the wine and simmer until reduced to 1 cup. Add the hot stock. Simmer, skimming occasionally, until the sauce is reduced to 2 cups. Season to taste with salt and pepper, then strain through a fine sieve and return to low heat to keep warm.

Prepare a medium charcoal fire. Rub lamb with olive oil, then season with thyme, salt, and pepper. When coals are covered with gray ash, grill lamb 2 to 3 minutes per side for medium-rare (about 120° F). Let rest for a few minutes before carving on the diagonal into ½-inch-thick slices. Divide the lamb among warm dinner plates and pass the sauce separately.

SERVES 8

BING CHERRY COMPOTE *with* BASIL GELATO

Basil in ice cream? Herbs in dessert may be a trend, but there's nothing new about it. I've had rosemary granita in Italy and seen recipes for medieval sweets that use savory herbs. Spring basil is always so delicately perfumed and fruity that it wasn't much of a leap to imagine it with fruit. This is a showstopper!

For the gelato:

- 8** loosely packed cups unblemished basil leaves
- ½** teaspoon sea salt, preferably gray salt (see Note on page 26)
- ½** teaspoon powdered vitamin C (ascorbic acid)
- 1** tablespoon sugar
- 1** quart vanilla ice cream, softened

To make the gelato: Blanch the basil leaves in boiling salted water for about 5 seconds, then place in an ice bath. Drain and wring the basil dry in a dish towel. Chop coarsely.

In a food processor, puree the basil with salt, powdered vitamin C, and just enough water to make a puree (about 6 tablespoons). You should have about 1½ cups basil puree. Transfer ½ cup puree to a small bowl and stir in 1 tablespoon sugar. Freeze the remaining puree for later use in pesto.

Place the ice cream in a bowl over ice. Quickly fold in the sweetened basil puree; you can fold it in completely or leave it streaky. Return ice cream to the freezer until serving time.

For the compote:

- 6** tablespoons unsalted butter
- ¾** cup light brown sugar
- 1** bay leaf
- ¾** cup orange juice
- 2** tablespoons lemon juice
- Pinch** sea salt, preferably gray salt (see Note on page 26)
- 4** cups pitted Bing cherries

To make the compote: Melt butter in a sauté pan over high heat. When it begins to brown, stir in sugar and bay leaf. When sugar dissolves, stir in citrus juices and salt. Cook, whisking, until sauce is reduced to ½ cup. Add the fruit and cook just until cherries are warmed through.

Put a generous spoonful of compote in each of 8 dishes. Top with a scoop of the gelato.

SERVES 8

