

DAN BERGER

## The Maturity Quest

‘How long will this wine last?’ I’ve been asked this question so many times I’ve lost count and I usually reply with one of a dozen answers. But I have assiduously avoided saying:

“What do you expect to get?”

That’s because I suspect the



answer would be, “A better wine,” but how, in the questioner’s mind, would it be better? And asking that ques-

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tion is like asking someone to describe the color blue.

Some people know what they want from older wines. Most do not.

There are several reasons to age any wine and one of the most important is to reach a point where it becomes more complex, because under almost no circumstance will the aging process increase the amount of fruit that the wine shows over when it is young. If you love fruit, drink wines young. If you prefer the complexity that comes from maturity, consider aging.

Aging wine isn’t for the faint of heart. But as so many long-term wine collectors have learned over decades, if you believe that complexity is worth waiting for, then you might benefit from aging properly made wines for a while. Even as little as two years after release can benefit many wines.

How much time a wine should be aged depends on many factors, some of which we related in a recent article on these pages. But there are no guarantees. One of the most mystical aspects of aging wine is part of a process that has rarely been investigated by science.

One reason for that is that in some cases one wine lover will describe a 30-year-old wine in glowing terms, and another

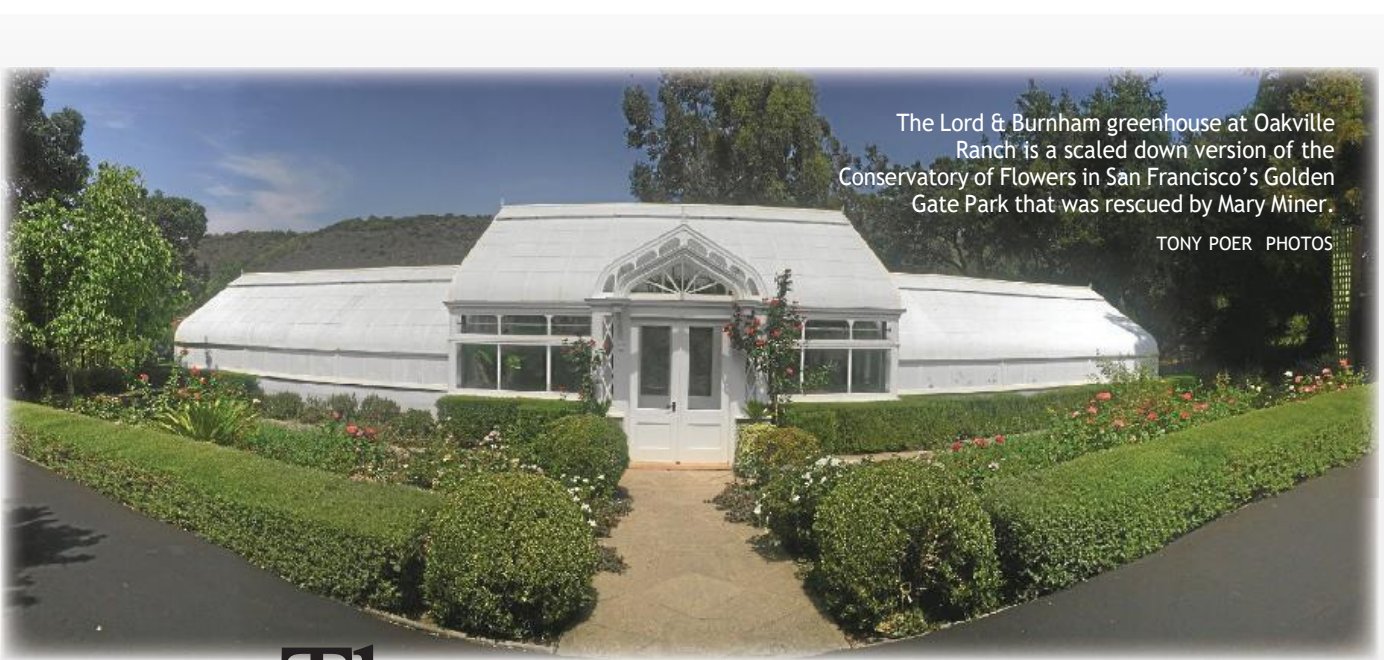
wine lover, perhaps with less experience with the kind of wine being observed, will say that same wine is awful.

Also, wine scientists know almost nothing about the process because all wines age differently depending on many factors – corks, cellaring conditions, bottle variation, how “minor” flaws either decline or propagate radically.

And old saying: There are no great wines, only great bottles of wine.

A classic example of a difference of opinion is with red Bordeaux. The greatest red wines from that acclaimed French district often have an aroma that indicates the presence of a yeast called *Brettanomyces* (brett). Experts who adore these wines often excuse a small amount of this curious aroma.

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The Lord & Burnham greenhouse at Oakville Ranch is a scaled down version of the Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park that was rescued by Mary Miner.

TONY POER PHOTOS

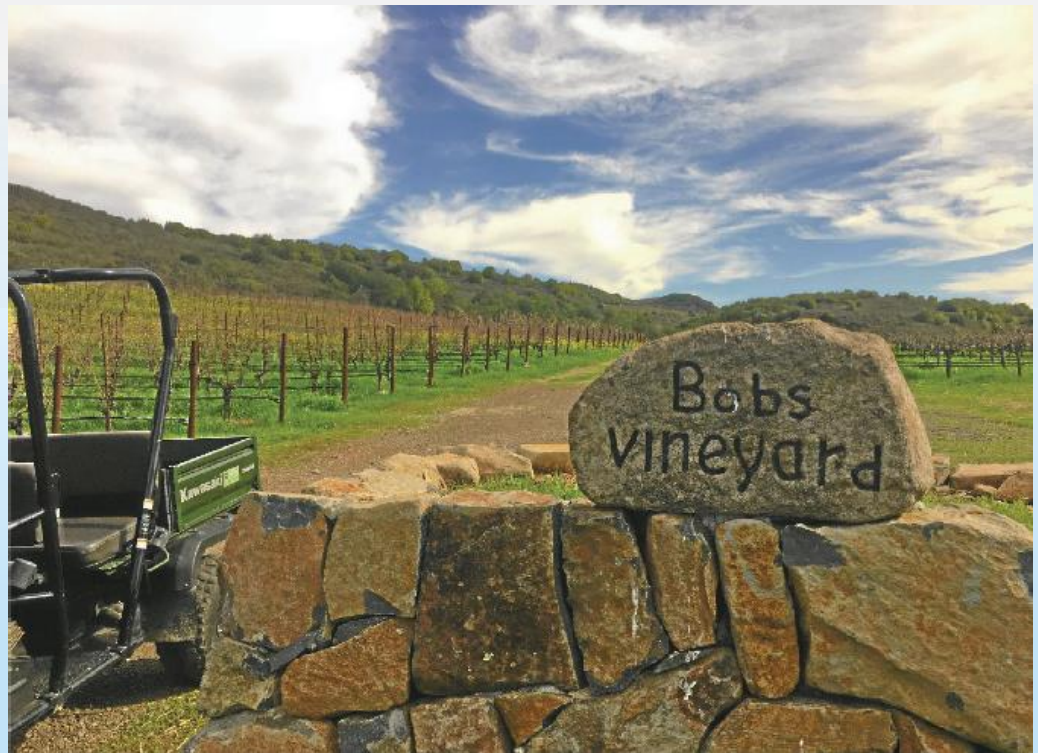
# The Women of Oakville Ranch PART II

TONY POER

On a hillside in east Oakville, just past the entrance to a picturesque wine estate, sits one of Napa Valley’s architectural marvels. It’s also a uniquely Californian curiosity.

A little over 20 years ago, a vintage greenhouse was reconstructed inside the front gate of Oakville Ranch. The ornate assembly of wood, glass, and metal is not just any building to house flowers and plants. It’s an original Lord & Burnham conservatory, built in 1937. The elegant structure is a scaled-down version of the Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, also constructed by the New York firm.

According to Shelia Gentry, the ranch’s general manager, the greenhouse was “rescued” from a Bay Area estate in the late 1990s by Mary Miner, the owner



The sign for Bob’s Vineyard, a tribute to the late Bob Miner, who, with his wife, Mary, founded Oakville Ranch.

of Oakville Ranch, and transported in pieces to her property. That its previous owner was Larry Ellison, the cofounder of Oracle Software with her late husband, Bob, makes it even more of a curiosity.

During a mid-summer tasting of the wines produced at Oakville Ranch, Gentry and winemaker Jennifer Rue described the wide variety of flora under the glass roof: succulents and palms, along with orchids, begonias, gardenias, and other flowers. “And there are air plants — lots of bromeliads and epiphytes,” said Rue. “You just walk in and it’s magnificent.”

At the Miner property, it’s just a short leap from the botanical to the viticultural. The carefully curated plants within the conservatory are contrasted against the mostly

wild 370 acres that surround it. But 70 of these acres are covered in organically — and carefully — grown vines. Phil Coturri, the respected viticulturist who manages them, is attuned to every detail of what comes up out of the soil, from alyssum and bell beans to Cabernet and Zinfandel.

Since founding his Sonoma-based company, Enterprise Vineyards, in the late 70s, to his first harvests for Mary Miner, and through to the present, Coturri’s approach to viticulture has gone largely unchanged. He grows grapes in exclusively organic vineyards, with a goal to produce fruit that is the best expression of a specific site.

Coturri started as the Oakville Ranch grape grower in 2007. “When I got there,

the soils were like walking on a concrete slab,” the grower recalled over the phone during this past harvest. “There was no life to them, and the grapes would shut down in the middle of the ripening cycle. By having healthier soils, it enables the tannins to ripen. The tannins become supple, and it enables terroir to be expressed.”

He noted in a guest column for *The Napa Valley Register* in 2012 that when he first arrived at the ranch, it was “a stunning vineyard site,” albeit one in need of better soil management.

“We began rehabilitating the vineyard from the ground up, focusing on soil health and biodiversity as cornerstones of effective organic vineyard management,” he wrote back then.

Coturri is known for his

highly effective use of cover crops in vineyards as the means of rehabilitation — of transforming a site like Oakville Ranch from compacted soils lacking in organic matter to, as he put it, “a vineyard that has bounce in it.”

In his *Register* column, he detailed his cover crop strategies: planting the aforementioned alyssum, along with brassicas like mustard and radishes; and spreading proprietary “green manure” and clover mixes between vine rows in the fall months to add organic matter and nutrients back into the soil.

As Oakville Ranch’s winemaker, Jen Rue may be just one of Coturri’s many clients, but her history with the property gives her a unique

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PLEASE THE PALATE

## A case study for regenerative farming

Robert Hall Winery looks ahead to the next 20 years

Conservancy has been at the heart of Robert Hall Winery from its birth 20 years ago. And as the team looks forward to the next 20 years, regenerative farming may be the key.



The winery was established in 1999 by Robert Hall, a businessman from Minnesota with a

ALLISON LEVINE

U.S. with the inspiration to make Rhone-style wines and decided that Paso Robles was the place to grow Rhone grapes, as well as Cabernet Sauvignon.

A consummate host, he wanted to be near the center of town, so he bought land in the Paso Robles Geneseo District in 1997. The first release of the Cabernet Sauvignon was in 2001.

Twenty years later, Robert Hall Winery has 172 estate vineyards straddled between two AVAs and they work with 20 growers across all 11 AVAs of Paso Robles. And since day one, Don Brady has been the winemaker, pro-

vast portfolio that included

as they are, O’Neill Vintners’ primary focus, from premium to bulk wine, has always been sustainability.

O’Neill Vintners started their sustainability initiative in 2017 and as a company, received official California Sustainable Vineyard & Winery certification from the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance. They worked with BioFiltro to construct the largest worm-powered winery wastewater system in the world, capable of filtering more than one million gallons of wastewater per day.

BioFiltro’s patented biody-



# Oakville

From C1

perspective on how he's helped improve its viticulture over the last 14 years.

She pointed out that before his arrival, the farming looked a lot different than it does today. "I think it's Phil's reverence for the soil that is a big part of what makes the grapes from the properties he farms so much more distinctive," she said during the July tasting at Materra winery in Oak Knoll, where she makes the Oakville Ranch wines.

After a decades-long career in organic vineyard practices, Coturri's message is consistent: A wine's expression of place is best achieved through grapes grown organically in biodiverse soil. As far as Mary Miner's team and their numerous vintner clients are concerned, his report from 10 harvests ago — "Fruit was bountiful, flavors were balanced yet intense, and winemakers were happy" — applies to the present.

Over the last several vintages, one of the happiest clients has been Helen Keplinger. The wine-maker-owner of Napa's Keplinger Wines is on a short list of vintners who buy grapes from Oakville Ranch, or even designate it on their own labels. Other clients include Rosemary Cakebread, Andy Erickson and Mary Miner's neighbor, Maya Dalla Valle.

The 2013 vintage was Keplinger's first year purchasing Oakville Ranch fruit. Since 2015, she has accessed the same blocks on the property, collaborating directly with Coturri.

"Phil worked with me to find a good fit for our goals," she wrote in a long text message. Though it was late August and a busy time at the onset of harvest, she had plenty of thoughts to share about her relationship to the place and its people, and how they contribute to her winemaking.

"That vineyard is very specific with its voice, and it comes through I believe in all of the wines from [Oakville Ranch]. There's a beautiful mix of red, blue, and black fruit, and a great level of concentration and potential for tannins. But for me what really sets it apart is the dried aromatic herb component — the Oakville Ranch garrigue, if you will — a hint of iron minerality, and freshness in its acidity."

Keplinger added that when she and Jen Rue occasionally run into each other in the vineyard, it's an opportunity to catch up and compare notes on the growing season. "There is a shared love and appreciation of the vineyard, Mary, Phil and his team," she texted, suggesting a common sentiment among Oakville Ranch's grape customers. "It's a privilege to work with them."

Winemakers like Keplinger aren't the only ones with direct access to the property. Shelia Gentry's occasional ATV tours offer visiting consumers and industry professionals a different way of looking at Oakville Ranch's soils and vines, not to mention a



Oakville Ranch's panoramic view looking west.

TONY POER PHOTO



Oakville Ranch's general manager Shelia Gentry and winemaker Jennifer Rue with Phil Coturri of Enterprise Vineyards.

OAKVILLE RANCH

dramatic view west across Napa Valley. No one knows this better than Anani Lawson, a Napa-based wine consultant and a former longtime sommelier at The French Laundry in Yountville.

Lawson is originally from Togo, one of the francophone nations of West Africa. His familiarity with the Oakville Ranch wines goes back to the mid-90s, when he worked under the wine director Tim Mosher at Terra Restaurant in St. Helena. Then, several years elapsed, and he lost track of the brand until January of this year, when he had an opportunity to tour the ranch with Gentry.

"When I visited the property, Shelia drove me around on the ATV, and she showed me just these spectacular and varied vistas of the place," Lawson said after a recent sit-down tasting of the Oakville Ranch 2016 Cabernet Sauvignon. "It's mind-boggling. I mean, to think this place is only a few minutes off the Silverado Trail. It's literally stunning."

His impressions of the ranch didn't stop with an appreciation of its perch high above the Valley. He thinks Rue's wines add to the allure of what the Oakville AVA offers to wine drinkers. As a sommelier, his experience includes buying and serving wines across a range of Oakville brands, from familiar names like Robert Mondavi, Opus One and Far Niente to more artisan labels such as Paradigm and Gamble Family. At around 800 cases in their current production, Oakville Ranch falls squarely into the latter category.

Compared to all of them, Lawson pointed out details

in the 2016 Cabernet that speak directly to the combination of Rue's and Coturri's talents. He considered the wine in his glass. "There's a floral and earthy tone here. I don't know if it has to do with a feminine aspect, but to me, what I see here is a wine that's balanced, like not too over-extracted. And you don't even know how much oak there is, because the oak isn't really speaking. The wine has minerality and soft, yet present, tannins. To me, it definitely says Cabernet."

Lawson's comments echoed Coturri's about supple tannins allowing for the expression of the vineyard's terroir. How that fruit translates to an Oakville Ranch "house" style of wine, versus that of another client winery, falls to the individual winemaker. "You know, winemaking — wines by good to great winemakers — really reflects the winemaker's personality," the grower said over the phone.

Coturri believes that the wine made by Rosemary Cakebread from the ranch's grapes is different from a Helen Keplinger wine, and different again from Jen Rue's. "They are really succinct. She knows exactly what she wants," he said of Cakebread's Gallica Cabernet Sauvignon, one of the brands that carry an Oakville Ranch designation on the label. "Rosemary's wines aren't flamboyant and boisterous. They're to-the-point, and they reflect her approach and her personality."

About Rue, he continued thoughtfully, "When I think of the wines that Jen makes, there's a little sense of humor in them, because that's what she carries when she walks through the vineyard.

And she knows the flavors. She has confidence in what she's picking it, and how she's going to make it. And that's reflected in the wines. Her wines exude confidence."

The winemaker also enjoys the confidence of knowing that each harvest, she's first in line for Oakville Ranch grapes. The vintner clients who follow after her, meanwhile, can rely on Coturri's skills to provide similarly top-quality fruit. "It's why I think the people — our client base — really love what we are able to give to them, because it's like them having their own estate-grown fruit," he said.

"They get to decide how it's thinned and when it's picked," Gentry explained.



Anani Lawson, a Napa-based wine consultant and a former longtime sommelier at The French Laundry, tastes Oakville Ranch wines.

TONY POER

"Granted, Phil has to work with a lot of personalities. But that's the luxury of what we're doing up here. We get to work with people that we want to work with, and that's huge."

Over the phone, Coturri imagined for a moment that if Mary Miner ever wanted to expand the brand and give Rue access to 100% of the grapes, the existing layout of the vineyard and its many small blocks would facilitate that. As it stands in 2021, the Oakville Ranch brand is, in Gentry's opinion, in a good place commercially. "We're small but mighty."

In one of the property's numerous vineyard blocks, there's a cairn-like stack of rocks that announces "Bob's Vineyard" on a carved stone sitting atop it. It remembers Bob Miner, of course, and is one of Gen-

try's requisite stops when she's touring guests.

"He comes to mind frequently when I'm out in the vineyard and working on the wines," Rue shared in an email recently. "The vineyard and the wines made from the property are an homage to Robert Miner and his dream cut short." But through their collective effort, the women of Oakville Ranch — and Phil Coturri — have kept Bob Miner's dream alive for creating an essential wine estate in the hills above Oakville.

"There's a term in French: *incontournable*," Anani Lawson said while meditating on his glass of 2016 Cabernet from the ranch. "It means 'unavoidable.' And I think Oakville is a place that you cannot get around within the landscape of Napa Valley."

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