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# The deep Napa Valley roots of Gamble Family Vineyards

Tim Carl Oct 18, 2018 Updated Oct 23, 2018

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Tom Gamble and his two vineyard dogs, Koa and Skip.

TIM CARL PHOTOGRAPHY

Gamble Family Vineyards and Winery is the creation of Tom and Colette Gamble, and given the couple’s history, it’s no wonder they are making some of the finest wines in the Napa Valley.

Tom's family has been farming Napa Valley soil for more than 100 years, and his wife, Colette's family (she's the daughter of the late Mathilde Carpy and Joseph Connolly) has been farming here since the mid 1870s.

"We have a crazy love for this valley," Tom said. "And although we make wine, we really think of ourselves as farmers first, which probably comes from our family history."

## Farmer first

Growing up in St. Helena Gamble always knew he'd be a farmer. When he wasn't in school he'd wake up early, often before sunrise, to help his father, George, manage the family's 20,000 acres in Napa County alone.

"At the time we were mostly raising cattle," he said. "I spent a lot of my childhood herding and fixing irrigation lines. I wanted to farm, but it wasn't until I got older that I focused on wine grapes."

Prior to venturing west, Gamble's great-great-grandfather, James, had co-founded Procter and Gamble in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the 1830s and made soap and candles for the Union Army during the Civil War. Gamble's grandfather, Launcelot, had little to do with P&G but instead traveled to California, following his older brother who had built a quicksilver mine in Napa County's rugged Knoxville region.

"He came to help his brother in the mines, but livestock was my grandfather's passion," Gamble said.

Launcelot eventually accumulated as much as 20,000 farming acres within the county of Napa, including such areas as Lake Berryessa and Oakville.

His tradition continues today with George raising cattle while Tom and Colette manage their own 175 planted acres of vineyard.

“When he [Launcelot] died in the ’70s, in order to keep the land we had to sell some and also formed a long-term lease with Beringer for 900 acres in Oakville,” Gamble said. “We still have that agreement. Over the years we’ve been able to purchase or lease our own vineyards, but that wasn’t until after I sowed a few wild oats.”

After graduating from St. Helena High School in 1979, Gamble first headed to UC Davis to study agriculture. But while he was there he became curious about what it might be like to live a less rural lifestyle.

“Growing up, I wasn’t one of those kids that ever got bored of this place, but when I got to college I became a little distracted and ended up transferring to UCLA to study film,” he said.

Here is something many people do not know about Gamble: He has been involved in the making of more than 30 films, including producing three. Working on films such as “The Grifters,” “Meet the Applegates” and “Too Fast Too Young” was enough to remind Gamble of his roots in farming.

“I always kept one foot in the Napa Valley. Even when I was commuting to L.A. every week I still lived here,” he said. “However, here’s one thing that’s similar between filmmaking and winemaking: They are both much harder professions than people think. But for me, I prefer the quiet connection with the earth and people that farming provides.”

Although not what some might call an environmentalist, Gamble and his team are insistent that they follow sustainable agriculture. Their winery and vineyards are certified Napa Green and Fish Friendly, and they use the “Three P’s — People, Planet and Profitability” — to guide their decision-making.

“We need to look beyond organics and consider the entire system and make it function and sustainable,” Gamble said.

## The Ag Preserve

Naming mentors such as Chuck Carpy, Jack Davies and Robert Mondavi, Gamble is adamant about the need to maintain a healthy and vibrant farming community for the Napa Valley to remain viable for generations.

“We’ll need to continue to evolve, but for them (his mentors) it was always about quality and sustainability — paying growers a fair price, taking care of people and learning how to take better care of our land — and that’s what will allow this valley to continue to survive in the future,” he said.

“It used to be that people could sit down and talk about how to solve tough problems, but today it seems like you have to be on one side or the other, and the two sides don’t talk,” Gamble said. “Back when my mother was collecting signatures for the Ag Preserve, it was different.

“If it wasn’t for the Ag Preserve I don’t know if we’d be sitting here in a vineyard talking about Napa Valley wine and the wine industry,” he said. “In my opinion, without it, this entire valley would have been paved over — like Silicon Valley.”

According to Gamble, in the mid-1950s the state of California estimated that by 1980 there would be 1 million people living in the Napa Valley. A decade after that dire prediction, in 1965, Assembly Bill 80 passed and decoupled the tax rate so that it wasn’t any longer based on revenue generated from the land but instead taxed at the “highest and best use” rate, which often meant the land had more value if it had a house or business built on it instead of crops grown.

“The valley understood what passage of the bill would mean, and so three years later (1968) the Ag Preserve was passed — and it passed with a majority of the supervisors being Republican,” Gamble said. “It was a very different time.”

Shortly after it passed, state officials announced the cancellation of plans to build a freeway stretching up the Napa Valley, and many housing subdivisions were taken off the planning schedule.

The limits of Napa County's Agricultural Preserve would ping-pong back and forth in terms of how large a parcel was needed before it might be subdivided. The original version set the minimum at 20 acres, but in 1979 the county raised it to 40 acres, then back to 20, then again to 40. Presently, with Measure J passed in 1990 and its successor, Measure P, in 2008, the legal 40-acre minimum remains in effect until 2058 unless changed by a vote of the people.

“What the Ag Preserve showed us is that the community can come together and work toward long-term solutions that have a positive impact on both the people and the environment,” Gamble said. “We’ve also shown a similar thing with the river restoration project that’s helped restore miles of the Napa River. We need more work there, but there’s hope.”

## Cairo the dog

Beyond the land, wine and community, the Gambles are passionate about animal welfare. For the last five years, they’ve opened their doors to their ranch for WineaPAWlooza, the annual fundraiser that helps support the Jameson Animal Rescue Ranch, a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to end animal cruelty and overpopulation in the Napa Valley and beyond.

One day when Gamble was driving in the hills above the Napa Valley he noticed a puppy chasing cars down the road. He pulled over, stopped and opened the door.

“When I opened the door he ran up, jumped into the car and gave me a lick,” Gamble said. “By the bean-sized ticks on him I knew he must have been out there for days, maybe longer.”

They named the dog Cairo.

“Cairo passed away a few years ago, but he was my constant companion for 15 years,” Gamble said. “We were inseparable — Velcro — and so that’s why we have our Cairo wine now, to remember him.”

Collette’s brother, Morgan Connolly, designed many of the property’s structures, one of which houses a by-appointment-only tasting room. Tom and British-born winemaker Jim Close have crafted wines with a balanced, and often delicate, nature that highlights their quality and pedigree. The grapes for the wines come from the couple’s vineyards, which include some of Napa’s best known terroir: Oakville, Yountville, Rutherford, St. Helena and Mount Veeder. The Gambles make less than a dozen wines, with some only available to wine-club members.

The Cairo Cabernet Sauvignon (\$130 a bottle and 800 cases made) is from the fruit of their Oakville vineyard. This sumptuous wine has a super-rich and unctuous mouthfeel with flavors of blackberry cream soda, dried cherry marmalade and raspberry coulis. The finish is long, with aromatic hints of dark-chocolate truffle and newly turned clay earth.

Besides Cairo, other of the wines in the Gamble lineup also speak to a hidden story.

The Heart Block Sauvignon Blanc (\$90 a bottle and 600 cases made) ranks as one of the finest examples of this variety produced in California. The name originates from the location of the grapevines in the center (heart) of their Yountville vineyard and a surveyor's telling Gamble that the vineyard's location is at the dead center of the Napa Valley. This wine is light-straw colored in the glass with aromas of honeysuckle, mango and Kaffir lime peel with a bright, but velvety, mouthfeel that lingers for more than 30 seconds.

The Mary Ann, a Cabernet Franc and Merlot blend (\$165 a bottle and 352 cases made) was inspired by Gamble's mother, who he says shares the wine's "elegance, opulence and firm character." This wine derives from Mount Veeder fruit and has the structure, flavor and complexity that often come from hillside vineyards. Here, blueberry cobbler, molasses and light-roasted espresso flavors mingle with aromas of dried sage, rosemary and hazelnut toffee.

## The future

Quietly, through lives of steady work and a desire to be good stewards of both the land and their community, the Gambles have created an inspiring model for what it means to be a vintner in the Napa Valley — not ones who are distant and separate from their community but instead ones who are intertwined and committed to the valley's long-term health and well-being.

"There is an Iroquois teaching that is the seventh-generation principle," Gamble said. "It taught that every decision — be it personal, governmental or corporate — must consider how it affects seven generations into the future, so that the sky, valleys and mountains will be here for them to enjoy, too."

Gamble paused and looked out toward the distant hills, many of them covered in vineyards and dotted with houses.

“We often don’t think much more than a few months down the road now,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean it has to always be that way. It doesn’t mean that we can’t change.”

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