

Uncorked

DOMESTIC BLISS

THE NAME IS BOND

THE TEAM THAT CREATED THE PRIZED HARLAN ESTATES CABERNET HAS BRANCHED OUT TO PRODUCE WINES MEANT TO RIVAL FIRST-GROWTH BORDEAUX

BY JAY MCINERNEY



The Bond wines that Bill Harlan and Bob Levy have made are the result of a special relationship between them and their growers designed to ensure consistent quality.

HARLAN ESTATES was the first of the cult cabernets that swept into the Napa Valley in the '90s like guerrillas coming down from the hills, challenging the preeminence of valley floor aristocrats like Mondavi and Heitz. Less than two decades later it's a classic, the most consistently celebrated and coveted Napa cab of them all. Meanwhile, owner Bill Harlan and winemaker Bob Levy have been creating a new wine—or, rather, three new wines—along with what may be a new paradigm,

or, at the very least, a new name to make connoisseurs and collectors salivate. The name is Bond.

This past spring the Harlan team released three Bond wines from the great 2001 vintage under the names St. Eden, Melbury, and Vecina. Having tasted them at the winery last fall, I can vouch for the fact that they are all Harlanesque—an adjective Robert Parker defines as “meaning first-growth Bordeaux complexity combined with Napa ripeness and power”—but they are also noticeably different from Harlan and one another. They are basically single-vineyard wines from special hillside sites around Napa, a fact that reflects the trend toward increasing site specificity as you travel up the price and prestige scale (a wine labeled Oakville being presumably more singular than one that lists California as its provenance). When I say “basically”—well, hold that thought.

Ever since he started visiting the great vineyards of France as a wine-loving real estate developer, Harlan had dreamed of creating a California “first growth”—a property to rival the great domaines of Bordeaux. Before he created Harlan Estates, stitching together prime hillside parcels overlooking the famed Martha's Vineyard, Harlan founded Merryvale Vineyards in 1982. He conceived Merryvale as a learning experience. Harlan and his partners bought grapes from more than 60 different growers in Napa, discovering what they considered some extraordinary grape real estate. “Bob Levy said to me, ‘You know, some of these vineyards are first growths,’” Harlan says. “But I put that behind me for a while.” Not for long, though.

While some critics wondered if Harlan Estates and similarly ultra-rich, small-production boutique cabs that emerged in the '90s were flashes in the pan, Bill Harlan was thinking about the future. “For Harlan to last for generations we had to make sure we didn't become too insular,” he says. “And we had to groom the next generation. Harlan Estates was too small for that.” Harlan had no desire to expand the production (about 1,500 cases) of his estate wine at the risk of compromising quality. But he and Levy hadn't forgotten

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JONATHAN KANTOR

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about some of those great vineyard sites from their Merryvale days, and they began talking to the owners.

The Bond concept, which Harlan began to develop more than a decade ago, was of "a stable of thoroughbreds." The stable would be run by the Harlan team, including Bob Levy and superstar consultant and *Mondovino* star Michel Rolland, but it would be entirely separate from Harlan Estates. It would be a brand with individual stars.

The challenge they faced was that it is very difficult to create a great wine using other people's grapes, since the buyer's and seller's motives are basically at odds. Growers, especially if they are paid by the ton, want to maximize their yields to maximize their profits, and high yields are the enemy of concentrated wine. The solution, as many grape buyers have concluded, is to pay by the acre and not by the ton, encouraging the growers to limit yields. In creating Bond, Harlan seems to have gone a step further than usual by devising a long-term profit-sharing plan with his growers.

The name Bond, besides being a family name on Harlan's mother's side, is intended to convey this idea of a mutual partnership between the Harlan team and the various growers. Harlan speaks of it as "a covenant." If this sounds a little fervent, all I can say is that great wines are inevitably the result of an obsessive vision. And Harlan has figured out a way to keep these vows intact. "It takes ten to twenty years," he says, "to build a name, for us to make these vineyards recognized." Under his agreement with the owners, the vineyard names under which Bond produces the wines can only be used jointly. If a grower and Bond later part ways, neither can use the name again. Even more unusual, Harlan reserves the right to tinker with blending of the Bond wines if vintage conditions call for it, in order to maintain a Bond standard; so the possibility exists that future Bond Melburys may be fine-tuned with juice from other Bond or Harlan vineyards—a fairly radical concept, since it mixes the seemingly contradictory single-vineyard ideal with the idea of a proprietary house style, making for a kind of a virtual single-vineyard wine. "It hasn't happened yet, but we're allowing ourselves the option to make a better wine," Harlan says, and hence there is no actual geographic

THE OENO FILE

The first three (all priced at \$175) are sold out, but they will be showing up at select restaurants and inevitably at auction. Be sure to get on the list for the 2003 vintage: bondstates.com or 707-944-9445.

- **2002 BOND MELBURY** Incredibly ripe, sweet blueberry and cassis fruit. Powerful but surprisingly accessible. Like a great young Pomerol.
- **2002 BOND VECINA** Much more massive and backward; a Latour to Melbury's Latour à Pomerol, with earthy notes and a mineral streak beneath the waves of cassis and blackberry. A monster.
- **2002 BOND ST. EDEN** Almost like a blend of the first two; lots of intensely concentrated ripe fruit, along with a bitter chocolate note and plenty of tannic structure.
- **2001 BOND MATRIARCH** Hard to believe this is the second wine of Bond's, a blend of the best grapes that don't go into the other wines. It's extremely concentrated, powerful, lush, and ripe, but quite friendly. \$75

info on the label. Wine purists may balk at this concept, but Harlan believes "the discerning wine consumer of the twenty-first century wants a consistency of quality." And he should probably expect it at \$175 a bottle.

Bond started with two vineyards, Vecina and Melbury, about eight acres each, and added a third, St. Eden, with the 2001 vintage. (The eventual goal is six Bond wines.) Based on the '01 and '02 vintages, the only ones I've tasted, the Vecina is the powerful, structured action-film vineyard, the Latour of the group, while the Melbury (my favorite) is more lush and delicate, like a great Pomerol; the St. Eden (which has garnered the highest Parker rating) seems to split the difference. The '02 wines, which will be released in April, are even sexier than the '01s, and eminently worthy of their illustrious pedigree. Just when I think I'm bored by Napa cabernets, along comes Bond and its stable of thoroughbreds. After tasting the wines, I'm thinking that rules are best left to the French. □