

The Persistence of Nature

A CONVERSATION WITH

Harry Eyres and H. William Harlan

HARRY EYRES The wine estate is solid and grounded, but it's also about something quite magical and changeable, as changeable as the weather and the seasons: the vintages. Last night we were drinking those two beautiful California cabernets from 1978. There's something very touching about wines of that age. They really get to a point that seems to me more ethereal, less physical. They've got a sort of grace that they don't have when they're young. I wonder whether this connects with your admiration for the long-lasting wines and wine estates of Bordeaux and Burgundy. They seem to have inspired you in some way.

H. WILLIAM HARLAN Yes, I do appreciate the European heritage and the fact that the châteaux and the wineries have existed for centuries. Partly it has to do with being an American: we are a younger nation. And it's also to do with being a Californian, and with my family history. My father's side of the family arrived from England in the seventeenth century, and eventually moved to California from Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl. My mother's family was here by the early nineteenth century, and moved west in covered wagons

before the Civil War. Their stories were not settled or permanent ones. And California isn't known for permanence. It's known for change, for not being frozen in time but for creating what's new, for being on the leading edge of what is the future—for discovering or inventing the future.

Future lifestyle, future culture.

HARLAN Future everything. If you think about time zones as centuries, and you start moving west from Mesopotamia, when you get to California you're millennia away. California is really about what's next, and about where we go after that. I don't think it's bad to circle back many zones or centuries to a place where there's longer and greater experience, where there's more permanence, where there really are some things that have lasted. Going to Europe and seeing these châteaux that have been there for hundreds of years, seeing vineyards in Burgundy that have been there for five or six hundred years, gave me a whole new perspective on how one life can be lived—although I certainly don't want to try to live life like it used to be.

I can't imagine you doing that.

HARLAN It's important to reflect a bit more on history and permanence.

It's a different sort of stimulation.

HARLAN We all have different needs at different times in our lives. We need the experience of different places, of time in the city, of time spent traveling, of time in the country—time for action, time for contemplation. This contrast, this balance, is key to getting the most out of our experiences. The winegrowing estate nurtures the family directly. It also has global reach: the bounty from this land leads us to develop relationships in many different cultures. Wine is a common thread among people: everyone eats and drinks, so it can make for a very rich and interesting life.

It sounds like there must have been some really big turning point in the trajectory of your life.

HARLAN Yes. It came when I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. As a young man, when I wasn't sure what I wanted to do next I tended to gravitate back to the things that had previously given me great satisfaction and success. I reached a point eventually when those same things no longer satisfied me, and I knew it was time for a change. For me that meant making the transition from the single life of living in hotels and on boats—from living in the moment, from a life of action—to building toward a more balanced life, a more purposeful and meaningful future, one with a foundation for permanence, one that included land, a family, and a home.

It's an exciting way to live—from moment to moment.

HARLAN It's wonderful, but after you've done it for so many years, it's time to grow up and start thinking a little more long-term. That's when I began to put more emphasis on a purpose and on realizing my dreams.

What were your dreams, exactly?

HARLAN I wanted a family, a vineyard, and a boat to go sailing around the world. I started with the last one first, and for a decade I worked a stretch and sailed a stretch. Next came the winery, a dream I'd had since I was a student at Berkeley in

1950s, when I started coming to the Napa Valley. The actual idea of creating a winery from scratch emerged in 1966, when I attended the opening of the Robert Mondavi Winery and realized that one person with a vision and tremendous reserves of energy could make something exist through sheer force of passion and will. I continued to come up here often over the years, as the Napa Valley began its real postwar renaissance. At the same time, I was also learning more about fine wines from an alumni adviser at Berkeley who had a great cellar. I then started to visit the wine country in Europe regularly, to try to understand what the common threads were among the world's most valuable vineyards.

In 1980, during the planning for the first Napa Valley Wine Auction, Bob Mondavi organized a five-week trip to Burgundy, to learn from the Hospices de Beaune. The itinerary also included visits to the grands crus of Burgundy, as well as to the first-growth châteaux of Bordeaux. Seeing those châteaux, talking to the winemakers, meeting the family members, clarified my dream. That's when I knew that I wanted to create a "first growth" of California, a wine that would be recognized among the world's best, a wine of great character and longevity. That dream required the right land. So working on creating something that I hoped would outlast me was an idea that resonated with me at the time. It still does.

The third dream was to get married and raise a family. The need to raise a family and to establish the values and a culture, that's even more important than the land and the business—and it actually gave me a different sense of time. Not long after that I bought the land where we started building Harlan Estate. The following year I met my wife-to-be. A year later we were married, and the year after that we started our family. None of those things happened until I saw this life of permanence. I feel that each of us is on our own schedule, and I probably wasn't ready before then.

It had to be a special piece of land—and a special woman!

HARLAN It's twenty-five years now, and not a day goes by that I don't count my blessings. I was very fortunate with both—the major turning points in my life.

No one can build a great winegrowing estate if they don't

have the right land and nature on their side. That really means the land and all the elements of nature that influence the specific site directly and indirectly, as well as the human element. It's this combination that is the medium of the art of wine.

As far as knowing if this was the right land, I didn't. When you carve a vineyard out of raw land, you can't know for sure. But I had learned that the world's most valuable vineyard lands were on slopes—not on the floor of the valley, not on the mountaintop, but that area just as you come up out of the valley floor. That was the kind of land I wanted. I also wanted to be where the odds of history were in my favor: starting in the 1800s, the best red wines produced in America had been from lands of the Rutherford-Oakville bench. My strategy was to be near but just above the benchlands. There was one location that seemed to qualify. The challenge was to figure out how to capture it, and then to see if all of the research and intuition and strategy were really going to work. Getting to the starting line took more than a decade.

When did you start?

HARLAN In 1984, when I acquired the initial forty acres. First we cleared ten acres for vineyards, planned and laid in the roads, put in the infrastructure, the drainage, and the water and utilities. Then we prepared the land and planted the vines. Our first harvest was in 1987. We made wine again in 1988 and 1989. Each vintage was better than the previous one, but it wasn't until 1990 that we really felt we had a chance to realize the dream. The wines kept improving in 1991, '92, and '93. By 1994, Bob Levy, Don Weaver, and I felt that all this work wasn't for naught.

When you tasted the '94 vintage, you felt that?

HARLAN Yes. It was the 1994 vintage, but not just that vintage. What really mattered was the trend that began in 1990. On the one hand, it seemed like an eternity before I felt like we really had something that was more than just a possibility. And it wasn't until two years later that we released our first wines.

But going back to the land: soon after acquiring those first forty acres, I began to add another few hundred acres to the estate, piece by piece. One reason I love this land so much is

because it produces great fruit. But I also love it because it is beautiful and full of contrasts. There's the area higher up the steeper slopes, where it's truly wilderness. It descends into the oak woodlands, which open up to the rolling hills and the parklands. This transition zone between the wild terrain of the forest and the open plain of the valley is where we planted the vineyards, built the winery, and established our home. This is the edge of the change, and where we experience the activities of nature the most. I think that much of the character of the wine comes from the fact that the vineyards are carved from—and next to—these wild lands, this forest, and these woodlands. It's a good metaphor for life, as well as for our winegrowing philosophy.

We need a bit of both. We need civilization, and clearly it's very beneficial to us as a species. On the other hand, to be completely shut up and lose contact with the wild, it seems that we lose something of ourselves, our nature.

HARLAN Without the experience of both, we don't fully appreciate either. The estate is a mile from end to end and spans a 1,000 feet in elevation. I often hike through the hills, the woodlands, and the forest here—the wild clears the mind.

What you have here in this place is rather special, and you also have the wildlife. In Bordeaux, there isn't much wildness. And in Burgundy, there's some forest at the top of the hill, but it's still a lot less wild than it is around here.

HARLAN Well, it's only been 160 years since California became a state. There's really been no one living on the estate's land since the Indians were here. They were nomads and hunters; I still find their arrowheads and grinding stones. There's a lot of wildlife that either lives here or passes through, everything from deer to bobcats to mountain lions to wild turkeys to foxes, coyotes, and all kinds of birds. It's interesting and enjoyable to see these animals moving around, coming and going.

I have a feeling this gets into the wine itself. This is a wine that somehow has a pretty good balance between the wild and the civilized. It's not in any way a rough and rugged wine, but it still has something in it, a certain mystery which maybe you don't get on the whole from the wines in the valley.



HARLAN As I said, I think that's partly the influence of the wild lands surrounding the vineyards, but it also has to do with the fact that almost all the land is on the hillsides, and about half of the estate is on volcanic soil and the other on sedimentary soil. We also have an unusual diversity of aspect, with northern, southern, eastern, and western exposures. I believe all this adds to the complexity of the wine.

And that can be part of what the wine teaches us: to rediscover parts of ourselves, and parts of nature.

HARLAN There are many comparisons to make between the vine and the human being. Stress is a good example. Human

beings all need a certain amount of stress. If we're not stressed enough, we won't perform to our potential. If we're stressed too much, we really can't perform at our potential for very long, if at all. The vines are the same way. One of the most important factors in building character in a wine is the right amount of stress.

The stress, that's partly to do with water.

HARLAN Well, it has to do with water, partially. It also has to do with heat and the soil, with how rich and deep the soil is, and so on. There isn't a lot of topsoil here. The roots aren't all on the surface. Some of our roots go down as much as twenty-five

to thirty feet, which is quite deep. The fruit develops many different facets of its character from what the roots pick up at different depths. That has partially to do with the type of rootstock, with the profile of the root itself, and with roots that have to dig deep and work hard because they're living in fractured soil that lacks many nutrients. But this also gives the vines greater consistency and quality, especially as they get older, because the roots aren't influenced quite as much by rain and by what's going on from vintage to vintage. We don't have to worry about a high water table, or about drainage, or about soil that's too rich and deep. The right amount of stress and a certain amount of harmony is all part of the puzzle.

One of the effects of all that is a considerable amount of complexity in the wine, even though it's extremely attractive. It has a very immediate attraction—it's voluptuous, and it has a lot of character.

HARLAN We have close to forty different blocks in the vineyard. These blocks are made up of four different varieties—cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, and petit verdot. They also have different rootstocks and different clones, as well as different exposures. They grow in land with different geological characteristics and in soils that are partly sedimentary and partly volcanic. All these things together give us a blending palette that enables us, and Bob Levy, our winemaker, above all, to express the character of this land with many layers and dimensions of complexity.

It was obviously important to you to make not just a good wine but something beyond that—a great wine, potentially a sublime wine.

HARLAN From the time I was very young, both my father and my grandfather drove into me to do my best at whatever I was doing. I've had certain successes and failures along the way, but the feeling of success is what keeps us going. I didn't want to go through the whole intense exercise that it takes to create a winegrowing estate—the enormous investment of personal commitment and time, of psychic energy and financial resources, of balancing risk and opportunity loss of not doing something else—to end up with something that was just merely good. If I

were going to do all that, to commit a big chunk of my life and resources, my dream was to create something that would give me great satisfaction—something that would take people to another place.

I was going to read you something from Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, who uses the word “sublime” in something he wrote about a painting by Titian, *The Bacchanal*, which depicts a kind of drunken orgy, a classical drunken orgy. He describes the place, with some trees and a mountain: “Man and woman have chosen this peaceful corner of the universe to enjoy existence. They are men and women, who drink, laugh, talk, dance, caress, sleep.”

HARLAN We certainly need women. Life wouldn't exist without male and female, or the eternal principles of masculine and feminine. In so many ways, woman is the best metaphor for wine: they evolve in similar ways, from the flesh and voluptuousness of youth to the charm and grace of maturity. And both are mysterious, and ultimately unknowable.

Then he goes on: “There are sublime moments in which we seem to coincide with the whole universe, our mind or spirit expand and reaches the horizon, and we are the same, we seem to be the same substance with what surrounds us. And we feel a certain harmony which governs everything. The moment of pleasure, the peak of life, and its integral expression.”

Can't a creator of a wine estate do that by creating the possibility of this kind of pleasure, this kind of harmony in life? There's something about a very special wine that I think is like art in the sense that it brings all the faculties into play, including the intellect and the senses. It takes us to another place.

HARLAN That is really what the artist does. Art is the idea of the sublime, of transition, of transformation. Something that's just good can't accomplish that. It has to be great. The purpose, the culture, and our driving passion at Harlan Estate is to do just that—through wine.

That makes me think about the film *Babette's Feast*, which is a wonderful fable about how great wine and food can transform people, how they can soften and civilize them and take them to

another time and place. In the movie, the combination of the two stirs all sorts of memories and images, and it does more: it engages emotions, humanizes, and fills people full of feeling and empathy. That's the magic we're talking about.

HARLAN Yes, wine is healthy, not just for the body but for the soul. There is something about wine that is very generous in breaking through, in letting out certain creative potentials. It can bring out certain thoughts and possibilities for the philosopher, for the artist, for the poet. Wine is mind-changing and mood-changing. When you're working with wine, you're working with something that's magical. Why not do that if you can? The magic isn't only the wine. It's how you feel when you move around the vineyards, when you work in the vineyards, when you're making the wine. This reminds me of a day years ago, when the mother of one of our team was helping us out during the harvest. Late in the afternoon, after working long and hard, but also having enjoyed the whole process of picking the fruit, bringing it into the winery, sorting it, and transferring it to the fermentation tanks, she said, "I hope the people who drink this wine enjoy it in the same spirit that we get to enjoy in making it."

And that ties in with what you were saying about leading people beyond what they're used to and challenging them in the same way that great art does. There's the very attractive, simple sort of art that people enjoy, but that has little or no depth. But in great works of art we tend to look for quite a lot of complexity.

HARLAN Well, think about architecture. It isn't the form alone. It's also the volume and the shape of space. And it's about context. Architecture is time, place, and function, and it reflects the character of those who create it and those who use it—their history, their culture, their heritage. Better yet, imagine the evolution of the artist and his works over a lifetime. The wine-growing estate is similar: the estate and its wines evolve over a lifetime, often over many lifetimes. The artist begins each new work with a blank canvas, and can choose among many available mediums for exploration and expression. The winemaker never begins each new work, each new vintage, with a blank canvas or a choice of mediums. The estate and nature provide the winemaker with the means of interpretation—the character of the estate

and the "mood" of the growing season. It's not just knowing and understanding the wine from each vintage, but knowing and understanding how the estate, the team, and their body of work has evolved over the estate's history. If you understand that, you can begin to understand the character of the land, and the culture of the estate as well.

We interpret static works of art differently depending on what we've experienced and how we've evolved since we last encountered them, even though the written words or the strokes of the brush remain the same. Wine, like people, evolves and changes over time, which adds another dimension and even greater interest to it as an art form. You can't capture the why of it, and proceed to the next vintage thinking you've done that. It's almost as if nature creates it: nature deals the hand, and we interpret it each year.

One of your main themes is aesthetic challenge—challenging the senses aesthetically beyond any conventional level. Are you saying that's a good thing to aim at?

HARLAN Aesthetic challenges are very important, but intellectual, physical, and spiritual ones are, too. If we're working on those facets of ourselves, then the work—not the results, but the actual work—brings a sense of satisfaction or happiness. And the results give us the ability to work even more.

Our goal here is to work to create something to a level that helps take our audience beyond where they might have gone if they hadn't experienced it. There are certain things that we recognize and enjoy even when we don't know much about them. But we can reach higher levels of enjoyment if we put in the time and effort to study, to learn, experience, and appreciate an art form or medium whether it's visual art, or music, or dance, or wine.

The performer, the creator, the artist, isn't the only one who has work to do. The discerning audience has to work also. The more the audience learns and experiences, the richer and deeper the appreciation of the art and the greater the potential for transformation.

It seems essential also that this is long-term work. Wine is not an instant product. It takes a vine many years to produce excellent



Bill Harlan and Harry Eyres walk the vineyards.

fruit. The wine evolves, and it evolves over years in the bottle. The wine estate itself evolves, too. So this is where two crucial aspects come in: the continuity of teamwork and family continuity, both over generations.

HARLAN Yes. That's why our perspective and our planning are for the short, the medium, and the long term. The winegrowing estate evolves over centuries. The vineyard cycle changes every thirty to fifty years. Nature's growing season progresses through each year, and begins the next anew. The winemaker and the vineyard manager progress over their lifetimes and, as mentors, pass on their experience and knowledge to their protégés for the next generation. The wine is enjoyed from release throughout the span of its evolution, from thirty to as long as a hundred years. The family, the leadership, and the winegrowing team are stewards of the estate and its culture. Together they have the responsibility to nurture, to improve, to establish the estate more deeply—and to pass it to successive generations in the same spirit they received it.

Your core team—the winemaker, the director, the vineyard manager—have all been with you for twenty-five years. That's pretty unusual anywhere, especially in California.

HARLAN It's unique for California. I certainly don't know of many, or any, others where that's the case.

In the decade before we got Harlan Estate going, we had another winery; the growth curve for the whole team was very steep. We were also working to learn and to improve as a team, to be the best that we could be. In the process, we discovered how fundamentally important it was to have a shared vision. We learned how to work together, and we gained great respect for each other's talents, abilities, gifts, and strengths. By the time we released our first Harlan Estate wine, we had produced thirteen vintages of wine working as a team. That continuity and consistency—the culture of shared vision and values and work ethic—has been a significant part of our beginning.

So what's the secret of keeping good people on board and motivated?

HARLAN I think it's in creating clarity of vision and in working together on something that's greater than ourselves, something

that we hope will outlive us. I also think that it's in creating a working environment where all can thrive and grow to their potential in a way that generates great satisfaction. We have to create opportunities to work in a zone that's exciting and challenging, yet sustainable. If we are all in alignment, if we all have trust and mutual respect—and if we all share in the success—it enables the business to thrive. It's better for the team and the family over the long term. It's better for all our customers. I also think that it makes for a better community.

It's a virtuous circle, for everybody.

HARLAN It's important to pass on what we've learned, because success isn't complete without a successor. We've been grooming the next generation of both the family and our extended family, the team. We've been in the process of buying another piece of land, another property, so that the next generation can be a part of creating something new—so that they can have the freedom to try new things, not just to do what we've been doing here. Hopefully they'll have learned a certain sense of taste and of the rightness of things, and they'll start from that foundation. If they don't have the freedom that we've had to make mistakes, they'll never really learn to the full extent of their potential.

So how important is wine? It's a great medium and it teaches us many lessons, but it's not the most important thing. We need to remember to work on what is really important in our lives, on something beyond ourselves, and beyond our lifetime.

And what is that?

HARLAN That's the big question, because the answer changes and evolves as we move through life. But winegrowing can be a common thread through these phases, and from one generation to the next.

It seems important to you that there should be a succession and permanence, as far as anything can be permanent.

HARLAN It's important to me that this land, the winegrowing estate, remains in the family for many generations. There's so much to learn from it. Partly it's because I feel that there are certain human imperatives. One of them is growing things. Another is being close to the land.

Just as important as the land is the culture that gets passed along with it, the timeless principles that have been with us for thousands of years and will be with us for thousands more. They have to do with living in sync with nature, with the responsibilities and privileges that come with being a part of a community, with human nature, and with everything else that is part of life on this planet. It's critical that we find a way to transmit this to the next generation and those that follow. If we can succeed in doing that, the lives of those who follow us will be better. The same holds true for the next generation, and the one after, and so on into the future. I think that making sure the next generation experiences nature and has a close relationship with the land is a way—perhaps even the best way—to communicate these fundamental values to them clearly enough so they understand them, believe them, trust them, and live them.

The generations—and each member of each generation—need the independence to live their lives and their passions. I hope they can use that passion in meaningful work, and that they enjoy life and make a difference. But however independent they are, I hope they hold onto their connection to the family, the family culture, and the family winegrowing enterprise, whether it's 1 percent or 90 percent of their lives. Our son, Will, born in 1987, and our daughter, Amanda, born in 1989, will be figuring these things out in the coming years.

So if it turns out eventually that your kids aren't interested in wine, you're not one to try to force people to do things against their will. This is more about education and teaching, about communicating to a young person who's obviously going to be interested in a lot of the things that young people are interested in.

HARLAN Yes. It's about building a foundation, about passion, and about timing. I feel that the student finds the teacher when the student is ready, as the old saying goes. If the teacher tries to get the student to do something the student is not ready for, it won't work. I'd like to be there when the student is ready.

So how do you make sure that the winegrowing estate is available if and when the student is ready not only to learn but also to work?

Take over the reins...

HARLAN They're not going to take over the reins unless they're interested, capable, prepared, and committed. One possible way, and it may be a good way, to give the next generation the time and room to evolve—to choose if, and how much, and in what way they want to be involved in the wine estate—is to have professional management to bridge the generations. That helps to ensure the family that the opportunity's there, but that they're not forced into it. It's complex, and not easy, and, even with this, the odds aren't totally in our favor.

But it has been done, in certain winegrowing estates in Europe.

HARLAN When you look at businesses that have lasted several hundred years, what they have in common is land, family ownership, family culture, and avoidance of debt. With no debt, or minimal debt, the enterprise is less vulnerable in difficult times. The family remains the best unit for passing on a culture. And the land is really important because the land is a non-depreciable asset, as long as you take care of it. The land is going to be there. It's been there for millions of years. It's the foundation from which to grow something, and there's nothing more solid than that.

As it is, the odds were against us being able to do the things we've already done. But we figured out a way to get here, and we keep working with humility and gratitude. We're prepared, we have a good attitude, and we don't give up. I'm very excited about the next twenty-five years, and the future is really bright. We have a fantastic team, both in continuity of experience and in the enthusiasm of youth. There's great promise with the next generation. We can't forget our family culture, we can't forget the individual, and we must constantly strive to improve. We've just scratched the surface, and this is only the beginning.