

The Voice of a Place

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BE FELT

by Karen MacNeil

The vineyard landscape at
Quintessa in Napa Valley.

Today, I had a moment that jolted me back to an essential emotion in wine. It was early in the morning and I was having coffee with Agustin Huneus, Sr., who along with his wife Valeria and son Agustin, own the Napa Valley estate Quintessa.

I remember the first time I drove by Quintessa’s “front door”—an immense stone arc wedged into an entire hillside. Vast and rugged, it seemed to whisper: *Deep inside here lies something you want to taste.*

It was an invitation from a rock—and thus, as I’ve come to understand, the best kind of invitation possible.

Because it was *the place* that spoke.

No one knows better than a wine journalist how cliché this can be. Even some \$15 Merlots have back labels heralding the wine inside the bottle as an “expression of a place.” After 35 years in the wine business, though, I have come to know irrevocably that most wines are not in fact the “voice of a particular vineyard.” They may be good wines; they may even give a lot of pleasure. But only *great* vineyards have a distinctive character that can actually be felt, intuited, realized. In a great vineyard, you can stand on that ground and feel the *current going through you*—sometimes before you ever even taste the wine.

Agustin said it best. In Napa Valley, where making the best possible Cabernet Sauvignon is what nearly everyone talks about (and it’s a worthy goal), he has only ever wanted something else. He has wanted to *witness* the flavor of Quintessa—to see what the place wanted to reveal.

The same is true of Bill Harlan, who at age 74 has just bought more than 850 acres of rough, secluded woodland high in the Mayacamas Mountains of Napa to plant vineyards to make a new wine called Promontory. Because walking the ridges that bordered the property, he could *feel* that this piece of ground had something pent up inside it. Something that could be captured and expressed through wine.

That is great wine’s mystery and miracle. What else allows us to taste the earth so intimately? Grape varieties, presses, barrels, winemaking techniques—and everything else that constitutes contemporary wine talk—are rungs way down on the ladder of importance. They are means, not ends.

And so I for one, want to stand in more vineyards and just try to listen; I want to taste more wines and hope to be swept away by the sense of the place. ■■

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