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## Cultivating a Cult Cabernet

*Bart and Daphne Araujo use hands-on techniques to craft wines with more subtlety than many Napa fruit bombs*

BY JAY MCINERNEY



Pablo Abuliak for The Wall Street Journal

Wine barrels aging in the cave at Araujo Estate.



Pablo Abuliak for The Wall Street Journal

A formal garden on the grounds.



Pablo Abuliak for The Wall Street Journal

Bart and Daphne Araujo.

*Calistoga, California* - The sun has yet to clear the peaks of the Palisades which rise above the vineyard, and the grapes are still cool to the touch as the vineyard workers, along with a groggy journalist visiting from New York, move up the manicured rows of Sauvignon Blanc, slicing the clusters and dropping them into small plastic bins. These are dumped into a larger collection bin at the end of the row, where Bart and Daphne Araujo are sorting the clusters, picking out leaves and discarding sunburned grapes. "I love the first day of harvest," says Daphne, an elegant, silver-haired Demeter, as she plucks a shriveled grape from a cluster.

This is the 20th harvest since the couple bought the Eisele vineyard, which was first planted in 1886 and has since become renowned for the quality of its Cabernet Sauvignon. Today they are harvesting a small lot of Sauvignon Blanc planted in a cooler area of the vineyard. This particular lot is less than an acre and it's picked in just over an hour. I'm tired and bleeding copiously after slicing my hand with the scimitar-shaped harvesting knife, but the Araujos seem positively exhilarated as they stride back to their house for breakfast, past the meticulously pruned Cabernet Sauvignon vines laden with knee-high clusters of purple grapes. Almost as many clusters are scattered on the ground, victims of a recent purge, sacrificed in order to concentrate the flavors of the surviving grapes, which Bart predicts will need another two to three weeks of hang time. The 32 acres of Bordeaux varietal vines yield an average of just 1,600 cases of their top Cabernet Sauvignon, one of Napa Valley's iconic wines.

There are certain privileged sites that yield great wine as a result of some serendipitous combination of geology, topography and microclimate. Located on an alluvial fan in the northeastern corner of Napa near the hot springs town of Calistoga, Eisele was renowned for the quality of its Cabernet long before the Araujos bought it in 1991. Beginning in 1975, Joseph Phelps made an Eisele

## Oenophile

Araujo's wines are tightly allocated, available mostly via the mailing list and in restaurants. Go to [Araujoestatewines.com](http://Araujoestatewines.com)



### 2009 Araujo Sauvignon Blanc Eisele Vineyard Napa Valley

This has a classic grassy Sauvignon Blanc nose with rich grapefruit flavors and an underlying mineral component. Very rich in texture and long on the finish.



### 2007 Araujo Estate Altigracia Cabernet Sauvignon

This is the estate's "second" Cabernet, made from Eisele fruit which didn't quite make the cut for the big wine. But second-string Eisele beats most starting lineups. This is really delicious now, with undertones of coffee and chocolate.



### 2007 Araujo Syrah Eisele Vineyard Napa Valley

From Syrah vines originally planted by Joseph Phelps in 1975, this is a terrific Syrah which might almost be mistaken—by those unfamiliar with the vineyard—for a good vintage of Guigal La Mouline.



### 2007 Araujo Cabernet Sauvignon Eisele Vineyard Napa Valley

A classic but precocious Eisele, very well balanced and already drinking well, with a touch of espresso, plus the vineyard's characteristic earthiness and bay leaf to balance out the cassis fruit.



### 2005 Araujo Cabernet Sauvignon Eisele Vineyard

When I commented that this was a real princess of a wine, Bart Araujo said, "Yes, but one with a career." In other words, this has everything. A very voluptuous texture with rich mocha flavors as well as the structure to improve for decades. Look for it on restaurant lists.

Vineyard Cabernet which would become one of Napa's defining wines, but Mr. Phelps didn't buy the vineyard when the Eisele family decided to sell it, at which point Bart Araujo, who'd been shopping for a prime Napa vineyard, pounced.

A San Francisco native, Mr. Araujo went to USC with ambitions of becoming a major-league baseball player until injuries forced him to reconsider his career path. After Harvard Business School, he returned to California and founded a successful construction business. He met Daphne, a landscape architect, when she applied for a job with the firm. After he sold his firm for a sizable sum, Bart began prowling Napa in search of a great vineyard.

"How do you make a small fortune in the wine business?" goes the joke. "You start with a large one." The Araujo narrative is in many ways the archetypal Napa story of a successful entrepreneur who brings his fortune, and his business acumen, to bear on a second career producing wine with his name on it. The birth of Araujo Estate coincided with the creation of the so-called cult Cabernets like Harlan, Colgin and Bryant Family. These wines were made in small quantities (2,000 cases or fewer) in a richer, riper style than the old-guard Napa cabs. But the Araujo story is unique, in part because of the history of the vineyard they purchased and in part because of their hands-on, fanatical devotion to it, and to every detail of grape growing and winemaking.

"After we purchased the property, I sat down and tasted the wines made from these grapes over the years, including the 1971 Ridge Eisele Vineyard made by Paul Draper, the '74 Conn Creek bottling, and the '75 Joseph Phelps," Mr. Araujo said. "Whoever made the wine, there was this signature earthy mineral element which seemed to come through."

If the vineyard deserves most of the credit, the Araujos go to great lengths to help it along. In the 1990s they began farming the vineyard organically; later, they began to make the switch to biodynamics, a holistic approach to agriculture based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian thinker who tried to synthesize science and mysticism. Biodynamic agriculture excludes the use of synthetic chemicals and coordinates planting and harvest cycles to the lunar and astronomical calendars. Mr. Araujo says that after reading an article one day he realized that many of his favorite estates in France, Domaine Leroy, Domaine Leflaive and Chapoutier among them, employed biodynamic farming. He began to explore the subject and eventually employed Jeff Dawson, who had previously worked as gardener for Steve Jobs, to make the conversion. In 2002, Araujo was certified by Demeter (named after the Greek harvest goddess), the nonprofit biodynamic organization. Mr. Araujo cheerfully admits that he doesn't understand all of the intricacies of biodynamics. "But hey," he says, "I'm a Catholic. I'm used to making leaps of faith." He says the vineyard is far healthier than it was 10 years ago, before the switch, and ripens earlier.

Ripeness is all, as Edgar reminds us in "King Lear," and the subject of ripeness is one of the most controversial in the wine world. In the Napa Valley, with its clement, un-European weather, growers have the luxury of ripe fruit year in and year out. But the question remains: How ripe is ripe? In recent years the tendency has been toward later picking, with much higher sugar levels—and therefore higher alcohol levels, since sugar converts to alcohol. (The rap is that these big voluptuous fruit bombs are the wines that appeal to the palates of certain influential critics, and win blind tastings.) In the 20 years of the Araujos' stewardship, the Eisele vineyard Cabernets have stayed fairly consistently in the 14% alcohol range—on the low side by 2010 Napa standards—which may be one reason that the vineyard's signature flavors come through from vintage to vintage. There is almost always an earthy component, more common in Bordeaux than in Napa, and an herbal note, which Bart speculates may have something to do with the numerous olive trees that surround the vineyard. Tasting through 20 years of Eiseles with winemaker Françoise Peschon, who worked at Haut-Brion before coming to Araujo, I was more than once reminded of the earthy, stony character of that great Bordeaux first growth, possibly my favorite. The 1991, the Araujos' first vintage, was especially complex, with many years of life ahead of it. The current release, the 2007, is a worthy successor.

Coincidentally, less than an hour after tasting 10 vintages culminating in the 2007 Araujo, I had lunch with a winemaker who brought along the 2007 vintage of a cab that had just gotten 99 points in the Wine Spectator. It was fascinating to taste after the Araujo. There was absolutely nothing on the menu—except possibly dessert—that could have stood up to this jammy, superripe, super-rich, high octane Cabernet. Actually, it was a dessert unto itself. It tasted like blueberry pie. No doubt there's an audience for this kind of wine—the winemaker told me it was already sold out. And it probably doesn't matter that it may not develop and age gracefully over the next 20 years. I'm all for diversity in the wine world, and I've got nothing against buxom bimbos, but tasting this wine made me instantly nostalgic for the sophisticated and nuanced sexiness of Araujo.

My hand is healing nicely, thanks. And I plan to return next year to taste the fruits of my labor when the 2010 Sauvignon Blanc is released.