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Araujos' Eisele vineyard, lineage of luminaries

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The first thing to notice when walking in the door at Araujo Estate is the line of bottles to the left, an amble through the history of the Eisele vineyard.

It begins with the 1971 from Ridge Vineyards, a reminder that Eisele was one of Paul Draper's most favored spots, and thought to be California's third vineyard-designated Cabernet. There's a brief homage to Conn Creek's 1974 bottling before a string of vintages from Joseph Phelps, the next luminary to highlight Eisele on its own.

Finally to the Araujo years. Bart and Daphne Araujo purchased the precious parcel in 1990, as a next step after selling A-M Homes, one of the largest home builders in the nation. If many Napa deals start with virgin land, this Calistoga site hosted grapes — Riesling and Zinfandel in toasty Calistoga — as far back as 1886. Milt and Barbara Eisele purchased the 137 acres in 1969, and although Robert Mondavi refused a vineyard designation, they took their grapes to someone who would, in this case Ridge. It became clear that even in a special spot for grapes, Eisele stood out as one of California's special places.

That long string of vintages is a testament to Eisele's staying power. Even today, Araujo crafts the Eisele wines to preserve a vineyard signature that dates back to that first Ridge

bottle: black fruit flavors and a big blanket of fine tannin from deep-rooted Cabernet on tough, complex soils. The wines aren't the flashiest on first encounter, but that quietly muscular structure gives them timelessness.

Which is clearly the aim. Many peacocky Napa Cabernets are formed as extensions of their cre-

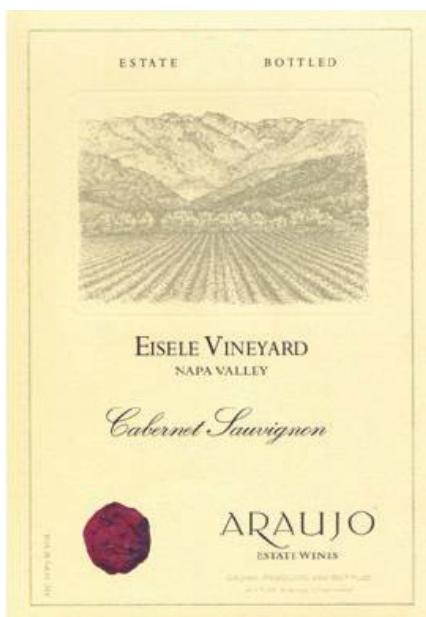
an estate wine of equal caliber to its cult Cab neighbors, but made in tribute to a historic site. And Araujo views himself as steward of a place that had already defined Napa Cabernet's image by the time he arrived.

"We want to improve on anything we can," he says, "but we don't want to be radical."

Eisele may be the only place imaginable to employ globe-trotting consultant Michel Rolland, frequent pincushion for wine traditionalists, yet to be one of the few American members of Renaissance des Appellations, a vintners' group founded by Loire vintner Nicolas Joly, the high prelate of biodynamics.

Little of the work at Eisele fits into the typical Cabernet mold. Rather than relying on fashionable vine clones, replantings are done with a so-called mass selection of the vineyard's own plants; 90 percent of the vines are this "Eisele clone." Originally planted in 1964, well before vines had genetic trees, its origins are a mystery.

Araujo seems to thrive on these contradictions. He knew of Eisele's potential when he bought the site, but realized that many of the world's greatest estates — places like Burgundy's Domaine de la Romanee-Conti — insisted on organics if not biodynamics. The conclusion was evident: If Eisele was truly a unique



ators' ambitions: noteworthy vineyards carved from raw land; meticulously tended and tweaked; turned into wine with the most powerhouse team money can buy.

Araujo may play in that world — the asking price for the 1,600 cases of 2006 Cabernet is \$275 a bottle — yet it is something else entirely:

bit of terroir, it had to be treated with more than the vague brushstrokes that often accompany talk of sustainable farming.

"One day I woke up and said, wait, that's such a copout," Bart Araujo recalls. "What does sustainable mean? It means I get to farm as close to organic as possible but if I get scared, I can nuke anything I want."

And Eisele was worth preserving. When the Araujos arrived, the vineyard was already 27 years old, with knobby head-pruned vines that turned out just a ton of fruit per acre. Yet those old vines, with tough old St. George rootstock, went so far down that even when Araujo ripped out the ailing plants, his crew couldn't dig far enough to fully extract the roots.

Many Napa vineyards enjoy the mineral richness of sediments washed down from the hills, but what makes Eisele unique is its location at a confluence of two watersheds high above: the Palisades and Saddleback, which send a mineral bounty flowing down toward the Napa River, creating soil that's a deep, intensely rocky agglomeration of rough cobbles and coarse sand.

"I've never worked with anything like it," says their viticulturist, Steve Matthiasson.

Though Eisele was a treasure, Araujo still had to purge chemical residues and do major replanting. In 1998, he converted it to organics. Three years later it was certified biodynamic. Now Araujo makes its own biodynamic preparations, and for the second year has completely eliminated the use of sulfur to control mildew, instead turning to a more novel tactic: spraying milk whey. It has at least the initial trappings of a self-contained biodynamic farm — two head of cattle to help

with biodynamic preparations, plus chickens and 1,000 olive trees.

Now the vineyard work is simply fine-tuning, with help from Matthiasson — moving vine shoots toward the eastern side to capture softer morning sun; using 11 blends of cover crops, including permanent cover in some areas; delaying tilling to blow off nitrogen from fresh-mowed grasses and legumes; widening vine wires to allow more light into the leaf canopy.

In the winery, too, there's far less tinkering than the usual uber-Cabernet regime. Forty different lots of grapes go into a basket press for a soft touch. Yeasts are all indigenous, and fermentation takes place in open-top steel and concrete tanks to preserve focus on the fruit.

Here, again, the Araujo approach has reconciled modern Napa expectations with a traditionalist view, including a succession of winemakers that began with Tony Soter (*Etude*, *Spottswoode*) and Mia Klein before moving to Françoise Peschon, and aided by that most famous of star consultants — Rolland, who consults even today. Matt Taylor, the current winemaker, began in 2005 as the vineyard manager. To have Rolland consulting on biodynamic Napa Cabernet is a sign of how Araujo merges both worlds.

"If something betters our wine then we're all for it," Taylor says. "But even though we do work with Michel, he is very keen to guard that Eisele style. He's never taken it over the top, and I don't think you can with this vineyard."

Even the Sauvignon Blanc gets complex treatment. Three-quarters goes into stainless steel barrels with a weekly stirring of lees to build texture. The rest goes into new oak, but the untoasted barrels are immersed

in water to leach out the wood flavors, offering a softer texture — but not the flavor — of oak. Here, again, the hope is to let the vineyard's flavors show through.

"It's not like we have to reinvent the wheel," Araujo says.

Yet that desire to honor Eisele has created a quiet, welcome reinvention.

From the notebook

No question the Araujo wines are priced similarly to Napa's top Cabernets. The Sauvignon Blanc is on par with some of California's top white wines, so keep an eye out. There's also a more affordable second Cabernet label, Altagracia, though it still averages around \$100.

2006 Araujo Estate Eisele Vineyard Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon: The current Eisele is a classic. Tobacco and an intense mineral presence amid smoky black cherry. That racy mineral echoes on the palate, with more plump black fruit and a sweet licorice-like after-presence. Fine tannins build into a smoldering intensity. The finish returns to aromatics, with a sandalwood echo. Open after 2013.

2008 Araujo Estate Eisele Vineyard Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc: A thoroughly surprising Sauvignon Blanc, with an unusual winemaking approach. Slightly waxy and saline (probably from the presence of a mineral-focused clone from Joseph Phelps) with rich sweet fruit — think melon and pineapple — shishito pepper highlights and a darker mineral presence. Opulent, and probably helped even more by a few years' aging.