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Calistoga's princely cabernets

Another reclusive vintner opens up to our Wine Guy

BY SCOTT GREENBERG

This week, I continue the tale of the two remarkable wine producers who reside in the magical land of Napa. Last week, I wrote about "The Prince of Spring Mountain," Philip Togni. This week, I have the pleasure of recalling my time with legendary wine producer, Bart Araujo, also known as "The Prince of Calistoga."

As Bart shows me around the vineyard, I feel more like I am on a historical archeological excursion than a tour. He carefully explains that this 38-acre marvel rests on a benchland in the northern part of the Valley where it is protected by the Palisades Mountains to the north and cooled by westerly breezes from the Chalk Hill Gap, which keeps the vineyard slightly cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter than the rest of the Valley floor. He bends down and shows me the well-drained cobbly soils that produce wines with a "rare combination of forthright character with precisely defined flavors and fine textures, deep concentration . . . and the capacity to develop profound complexity with age."

Araujo's passion is infectious, and as he retells the history of the vineyard, I am mentally transported back to 1971 when Ridge Vineyards produced the first 'Eisele Vineyard' cabernet sauvignon (at the time one of



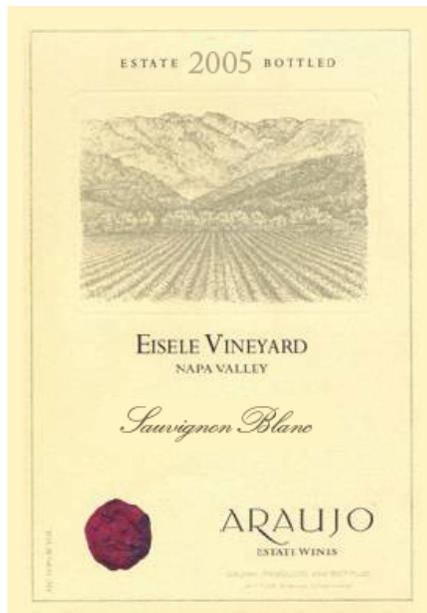
California winemaker Bart Araujo presides over 38 acres of grapes in Napa Valley.

only four wineries to label a vineyard-designated wine). In 1975, Joseph Phelps' wine-maker, Craig Williams, began his long string of elegant wines made from Eisele Vineyard fruit. A great wine trivia question is the fact that 1991 is the only year that produced two Eisele Vineyard cabernet sauvignon wines; the last year from Joseph Phelps and the first year from Araujo, the latter made by consulting winemaker Tony Soter.

Another remarkable feature of the vineyard are the vines themselves, mostly planted to cabernet sauvignon, and syrah and sauvignon

blanc to a lesser extent. Each vine is trained and pruned to perfection by hand in order to take advantage of even the slightest difference in elevation or slope. Collectively, they look like a finely coiled do and there is not a proverbial "hair out of place." In addition, this fastidious practice ensures that only the best bunch of berries will ripen on each vine.

Bart said he truly believes that he and his wife, Daphne, are merely "stewards of this vineyard," and that it is their responsibility to nurture the land for future generations. Thanks to the strict biodynamic farming



techniques (Araujo is one of just a few wineries certified as both biodynamic and organic) adopted by the Araujos, they are enhancing the health of the soil and vines. They also produce organic olive oil from the olive trees and honey from the beekeeping operation, which they sell to consumers, and fruits and vegetables for their own table (Bart claims that the eggs laid by their vineyard-roaming chickens are the best you will ever taste).

But even with the vineyard location and the special care taken in farming the land, it still comes down to winemaking, which is currently in the hands of Françoise Peschon. Additionally, Peschon has the luxury of consulting with one of the most renowned wine professionals in the world, Michele Roland. Working together with the Araujos, Michele and Françoise will spend hours tasting and blending wines from each block in the vineyard to ensure the final product is the best expression of the vineyard.

2003 Araujo Cabernet Sauvignon, Eisele Vineyards, Calistoga (\$210)

While you might get sticker shock from the price, remember that only 1,600 cases of this Bordeaux-esque beauty were produced. It possesses a remarkable nose, with scents of violets, cassis, tobacco and anise. But when tasting this wine, the first

thing I notice is the way it coats the tongue from the start with dazzling flavors of black plums, cassis and blackberry jam and ends with hints of cherry, black licorice and smoke on the ultra-long finish. The velvety/sweet tannins will ensure a long life and should be cellared to perfection for 10 to 20 years.

2003 Araujo Altagracia Cabernet Sauvignon, Calistoga (\$100)

I've heard this wine referred to as a "second" wine. Bart calls it a "wine that stands on its own." Made from estate grown grapes that don't make it into the Eisele cabernet, it's still a contender, with flavors of ripe black tobacco on the backend. I would even lay this wine down for a few years to let it fully evolve.

2005 Araujo Estate Sauvignon Blanc, Eisele Vineyard (\$40)

Simply one of the best domestic sauvignon blancs I have ever tasted. Crisp, clean flavors of melon and citrus refresh the palate while hints of limestone and flint remind you to take another sip.

Now the story of the two princely winemakers is told. But for your own edification, I suggest you try a bottle of each and see which kingdom you'd like to live in.