



Weekly Interview: Jim Close

Posted by **Albert Pak** | Posted in **Interviews** | Posted on 04-22-2016



Every week, as our regular readers know, we pose a series of questions to a winemaker. This week, we are featuring **Jim Close**, the winemaker at **Gamble Family Vineyards**.

Gamble Family Vineyards was founded in Tom Gamble, a third-generation Napa native. Tom proudly calls himself owner/farmer: one gets the sense that Tom is deeply committed to the land that he works. Jim joined Gamble Family Vineyards in 2003, after spending a year in Languedoc. Before that, as you'll read, Jim studied winemaking in the UK, where he grew

up in a wine-appreciating family.

Check out the interview below the fold!

Where were you born and raised?

I was born in Bromley, a suburb just south of London. Perhaps an area not widely known for wine, but my family always had wine in the house. My father's cellar was always well-stocked, particularly with wine from France. My family would often take the ferry over to France, with the express goal of filling up the boot with wine.

When and how did you get into wine?

I suppose Sunday roast dinners as a child was my first memory of wine. My dad would go to his cellar to select something nice for the family meal. My parents would talk about the wine, where it came from, what family made it. For me, from an early age wine became associated with family, with food, with sharing, with happy times.

What has been your career path to where you are?

It began at the University in Edinburgh with no clear idea of what I wanted to do with the Psychology degree I was studying for. In the evenings and weekends I'd work at Threshers, a wine shop and that's where I thrived. Surrounded by wine and people that loved wine. After graduation I took a year off, traveling around the world with my University mates. We visited South America, New Zealand and Australia happening across some great wineries along the way. Then it finally came to me. Wine school. I headed back to England and studied Viticulture and Enology at the University of Brighton (Plumpton College). I've done nothing but wine ever since. A harvest in England, one in France, and now sixteen in Napa.



In your view, what makes your vineyards special?

When I first started working for Tom Gamble, my fiancé (now wife) floated the idea of us moving away from Northern California. I explained to her how fortunate I was, working for a grower like Tom Gamble. That many winemakers spend their entire careers trying to make good wine from marginal or substandard fruit, and I get to work with one of the most respected growers in the world. Every detail is important to Tom. Matching the correct varietal (down to the specific clone) to the site is critically important. Tom and Colette Gamble live between the Napa River and Conn Creek, in the shadow of the Yountville Hill. This land between the rivers is gravelly and rich in alluvial deposits, ideal for Sauvignon Blanc. A couple of miles north, the warmer temperatures, gentle slopes, and rocky volcanic soils of our Family Home Vineyard provide a perfectly stressful environment for our Cabernet Sauvignon.



What is your general winemaking philosophy?

To make delicious, balanced, food-friendly wines that are relatively low in alcohol. To make wines with a light hand, allowing the intrinsic quality of the fruit to do most of the work. Wines that allow you to savor them and ponder awhile. My style is definitely Napa fruit-forward but with a conscious, respectful nod to Old World restraint.

What's your biggest challenge as a winemaker?

Remembering to enjoy the process. Harvest every year is different, every year presents its own challenges. This is what makes the resulting wine fascinating and keeps me interested year after year. Sometimes the passion to make the best wine I possibly can leads to an intensity of concentration that detracts from the wonder of living and working in one of the most beautiful places on earth. Winemaking, wine drinking, and wine sharing should be a joyous experience. Not over-analyzed, not overwrought, just gently tweaked.

Who are your favorite winemakers in history, through personal account, or their wines?

Didier Dagueneau for elevating Sauvignon Blanc. David DeSante for being an extremely talented and generous winemaker. He spent a long time mentoring me in my early career and he has surely had the greatest influence on my style. David's wines reflect his integrity and an uncompromising need to make idiosyncratic wines he is intensely proud of.

What new winemakers are you most excited about, and why?

Matthew Rorick (Forlorn Hope) is an inspiration. He loves to take the path less well traveled, embracing unexpected grape growing sites and gently fashioning unfashionable grape varieties into wines full of personality and life.

What's your favorite wine region in the world – other than your own?

Bordeaux, the benchmark. Continually inspiring.

What's the best wine you've ever tasted? The most interesting?

One of the best and most interesting wines I have ever had the pleasure to taste was a Chenin Blanc from Savennières. The 2001 Domaine du Closel 'Jalousie' – fabulously complex (reminiscent of wax, honey, nuts, mineral and floral notes), rich yet in no way heavy or ponderous. Beautifully balanced, nuanced and thought provoking. A wine to savor. A wine that reminds me that super-clean, linear winemaking, while technically perfect may not always produce the most interesting wine. A twist, a tweak, native yeasts, a little oxygen or the odd new barrel can add another layer of interest to a wine.



What's the oldest bottle in your cellar? The most expensive?

A 2001 Chateau Latour, gratefully received as a gift and soon to be drunk.

What's open in your kitchen right now?

Our Paramount Red Blend and a Sinegal Sauvignon Blanc.

If you had to pick one red and one white to drink for the next month with every dinner, what would you choose?

Stefano Lubiana Pinot Noir; a beautiful, elegant, fruit filled

Pinot from Tasmania – very enjoyable drinking. Henri Bourgeois Sancerre La Cote des Monts Damnés; great balance between fruit and steely minerality.

Is beer ever better than wine?

Yes, on a beach in Mexico. And during every harvest.

How do you spend your days off?

I'm happiest outdoors. On top of a mountain, walking through a forest or around a lake.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

I'm an amazing dancer (just kidding).

If you weren't making wine for a living, what would you be doing?

Making beer.

How do you define success?

I think this is it. I'm very happy doing what I do.