

# Vineyard & Winery Management Magazine

August 2016

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## TOM GAMBLE

### CREATING A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS, ONE VINEYARD AT A TIME

**S**elf-described "third-generation farmer, first-generation wine guy," Tom Gamble of Gamble Family Vineyards grew up on his family's farm in Napa Valley's Oakville district. His grandfather, Laurence Gamble, first began farming in Napa County in 1916. He raised livestock and grew hay crops, walnut, pear and other fruit trees as well as tomatoes (there was a nearby tomato processing facility in Rutherford at the time). "My grandfather grew whatever he thought he could make money from farming," says Gamble. "He was also really good about buying land that had natural water resources. His actions stuck with me and have influenced my land buying." The family's Oakville land has since grown to more than 900 acres, which has been leased to Beinger Vineyards since 1977.

Eventually, Gamble decided to pursue creating wines under his own label. In 2003, he hired winemaker Jim Close, and the first Gamble Family Vineyards wine was released in 2005. "That decision didn't come lightly, given our family legacy in the region, but my main goal is to carry on our heritage of farming. Hopefully, that's reflected in the glass," he says.

In 2008, Gamble purchased an Oakville ranch from the Lincoln family, who'd owned it since the 19th century. This is where he began building his winery in 2012, working with Close to create a building consistent with the property's history, but that also has modern winemaking technology. "I got to choose all the shiny stuff," says Close, pointing out tanks that are temperature controlled and remotely monitored via software provided by Refrigeration Technology



Winemaker Jim Close focuses on creating balanced wines that reflect the character of each vineyard.

crisp finish. Sauvignon of several Cabernet. St. Petersburg that has a bold flavor and Mary. Bordeaux Cabernet. From Gamble's purchase on after his mother. Next, we property's tanks are being replanted, through, we are two was grandfather strong to 1 from his farm building. private reservoir that supplies water to the property. This is one place



Tom Gamble with his sheep dog, Kim, who manages to herd what or whoever is nearby.

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The Family Home vineyard is in the center of the Oakville appellation and is at the highest elevation on the property. It surrounds the home where Gamble grew up, and where his mom still resides.

where the roots most definitely run deep — and it certainly does show in the wines created there.

**Vineyard & Winery Management** [V&WM] Do you still farm some of the same things your family did as you were growing up?

Tom Gamble [TG] There are still some olive trees that came with the property. We didn't plant them and never sold the olives commercially. But my nieces and nephews visit and help bottle the olive oil to sell at school fundraisers. It's become a family tradition and is really fun.

[V&WM] Since you've been in Napa your whole life, what changes have you seen over time? What stands out to you most, and what are your thoughts on the future of the valley?

[TG] For starters, riding horses along Highway 29 is no longer advisable. The Agricultural Preserve pushed back on urban pressures, giving the wine industry breathing room to develop. As

resources are strained, the future is now being contested between those who see limits and those who don't. The future can be bright if we uphold the tenants of the Ag Preserve and subsequent zoning regulations, which have allowed both the unincorporated and incorporated areas to flourish by dividing the duties (urban uses such as residential, hotels, restaurants and so forth in town vs. farming, grape processing and managing visitor flow to wineries in rural areas), so to speak. This tension has existed since before 1968's Ag Preserve. Now, the visionaries of that era are near gone and a new population needs to be educated on why an agricultural area on the border of a massive urban center still exists. The exciting aspect is that dedicated open space is the largest land use in Napa — much more than 100,000 acres of public land.

[V&WM] What was your inspiration to purchase and plant vineyards?

[TG] I knew I wanted to be in agriculture from an early age. My dad would take me out as he worked the farm and I'd absorb what was happening. We had a lot of walnut trees and I'd pick and sack them, then sell each 25-pound

sack for \$5. It gave me the entrepreneurial bug.

From 1979 to 1984, I took all the viticulture classes I could at UC Davis. During that time, I started a vineyard company with some partners. We started in 1981 by converting a hops field in Russian River Valley to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes, a project with Piper Sonoma. The company grew and we sold it after 10 or 12 years. I took a short break after that, then started buying vineyards in Napa.

I now have 175 acres planted or being replanted.

[V&WM] What's happening now with the winery and its surrounding vineyards?

[TG] We're putting the finishing touches on the winery and replanting some of the vineyards alongside the Cairo block of Cabernet Sauvignon, which was originally planted by the Lincolns. Behind it are Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. In front [if facing south] is Merlot and Petit Verdot.



The Gamble vineyard is planted with Sauvignon Blanc.

## TOM GAMBLE'S RÉSUMÉ

- **Birthplace:** Napa Valley, Calif.
- **Current Position:** Owner/Farmer
- **Professional Background:** Gamble's first business venture into farming was in 1981. To this day, he holds no professional degrees or licenses. He says his farm managers now enjoy the privilege of keeping up with PCA (Agricultural Pest Control Applicator), FLC (Farm Labor Contractor) and all of the other lovely licenses required to farm.
- **Education:** He studied viticulture and agriculture economics at UC Davis from 1979 to 1984. In 1984, "I chased a girl to UCLA and got a degree in English. I lost the girl... ahhh youth!" he says.
- **Personal:** Gamble is married to his wife, Colette. "We live a fairly low-key life, which suits us farmers well. In our rare time off, we enjoy our land in many ways with friends and family, which includes a dozen nieces and nephews. Hopefully, some of them will take up the mantle," he says.

[V&WM] What type of technology do you use in the vineyards?

[TG] We use Ranch Systems controls for weather measurements, soil moisture, mildew pressure and evapotranspiration. Irrigation is operated by remote

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The winery is designed to match the property's historic elements.

control with pressure monitoring for leaks.

[V&WM] Tell us about your newest vineyard purchase on Mount Veeder.

[TG] It's the vineyard previously owned by Tom LaFour. We're replanting it with Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon. It's hard to ripen Cabernet Sauvignon up there, so it'll get the best exposure. We're also doing solar measurements to decide how to deal with the vineyard's aspects. Some of the fruit will be grafted onto existing vines.

The vineyard purchase is beneficial because there's no clearing necessary and it gets a decent

amount of water. It's one of the highest and coolest plantings on Mount Veeder.

[V&WM] Do you have plans to purchase more vineyards?

[TG] I'm always looking for opportunities, but not aggressively at the moment. We have a lot of replanting to do now and are focusing on that. I want to focus on margins and profitability before I get ready for another round. Plus my wife wants to remodel our house and it's about time she got to do that.

[V&WM] What sort of efforts are you making regarding sustainability?

[TG] We look at the big picture of sustainability: people, planet

to try and grow to make the sustainable business and to leave it and the land in better shape than when my family found it so the kids can keep things going in that direction. This is an industry that calls for long-term planning.

Comments? Please email us at feedback@vwmmedia.com.