

# Meet the farmer protecting the environment in Wine Country



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Farmer Tom Gamble with the Napa river running behind him on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019, in Napa, Calif.

Paul Kuroda / Special to The Chronicle

When visiting tasting rooms in the Napa Valley, it's often easy to overlook all the factors that have made the wine stand over the years. To Tom Gamble, owner of Gamble Family Vineyards, the many preservation efforts in the region have been essential in keeping Napa Valley wines — and the region itself — flourishing.

Throughout his life, Gamble has been intimately involved with sustainability in agriculture. His family has been farming the Napa Valley since 1916, and working alongside his father George gave Gamble the opportunity to learn about the importance of the land's habitat and the overall ecosystem.

"Farming is not just what takes place on the land," says Gamble. "Farming depends on a healthy ecosystem to be sustainable. We find that the more holistically we think, the more sustainable we become."



His mother, Mary Ann McGuire, was active in collecting signatures to establish the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve in 1968. The nation's first agricultural preserve, it protects vineyards and wineries from commercial development and ensures that the land is used strictly for agricultural purposes.



Farmer Tom Gamble, below, has given 10 acres of land along the sides of the Napa River (tree lined at left) so it can flow naturally on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019, in Napa, Calif.

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“Without the agricultural preserve, I don’t know that the wine industry could have survived long enough to show that it could be a great, sustainable industry,” says Gamble. “It bought time for all the mavericks and people with foresight — like Robert Mondavi and Jack Davies — to prove what they could do, and a little less than a decade after, the Judgment of Paris drew everybody’s attention to the Napa Valley.”

The agricultural preserve is now 50 years old, but for the region to keep what it has in terms of agriculture requires educating people about farming in a society where citizens are less connected to the land. The Napa River once meandered across a wide swath of the valley floor until levees and



berms were built and the river was confined to channels with steep banks as agriculture moved into the area. Fish suffered in the channeled river and flooding regularly inundated the city of Napa, and nearby homes and farms. The Napa River Restoration Project — to which Gamble has donated 10 acres of his land — has been one of California’s most ambitious agricultural landowner-initiated ecosystem restoration projects, expanding the river corridor to enhance fish and wildlife habitat, reduce bank erosion, and add 135 acres of floodplain and riparian habitats.

“We wanted third-party verification programs to highlight good work with the river and land, and that would also challenge us to do more,” says Gamble. “Farmers initiated Fish Friendly Farming, and Napa Green was initiated primarily by the vintners, because they wanted the green land verification for their vineyards, and the green winery verification for their wineries.” Gamble Family Vineyards is certified in all these programs.



Balloons fly near Tom Gamble's farm on Friday, Oct. 4, 2019, in Napa, Calif.  
Paul Kuroda / Special to The Chronicle

As sustainable farming has become more popular, even visitors to Gamble’s winery are curious as to how Wine Country can advance beyond organic. “Visitors become very excited when we start talking about these good things we’re doing,” says Gamble. “Whether it’s the river project or the fact that 50% of our electricity and power at the winery is from renewable sources,

and 100% of our water is recycled. If you just open the door a little bit, the conversation starts to flow. It's almost like people don't think to even ask."

There are enough successful examples in the Napa Valley for those who want to understand why wineries should go beyond goals of sustainability to a truly regenerative process. And for Gamble, the key is remembering the roots of the region.

"I think people need to remember that at the wine industry's root, it's about agriculture and a co-existence with nature that makes it work," says Gamble. "There's still a class of people that work the land and are dedicated to it. All this environmental progress is because of those people. There's a lot of hard work that goes into making an elegant product and it starts because somebody is putting their hands or feet into the dirt and wants to see the dirt regenerate. As we commune with and try to have this holy trinity of people/planet/profit, we think about regenerating to keep this going for generations. It all starts with the farmer and the land."