

Harlan Estate Plays the Long Game

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James Molesworth

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The Napa Valley cult Cabernet star is building for the future



Photo by: Courtesy of Harlan Estate

Harlan Estate is built to last.

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Senior editor James Molesworth will become Wine Spectator's lead taster for California Cabernet Sauvignon at the end of this year. He recently made a trip to Napa Valley and is posting dispatches from some of the region's top wineries. And don't miss our Q&A with James on his Napa Cab eureka moments, his scoring philosophy, and what he's up to when he's not tasting wine.

Immaculately manicured terraces of Cabernet Sauvignon vines, some dating to 1985 (old by Napa Valley standards), rise on the hills above the town of Oakville, in the high-rent district home to other famous Napa vineyards such as [To Kalon](#). The terraces belong to [Harlan Estate](#), and they are the result of a carefully planned, decades-long approach by owner [H. William Harlan](#) and his team.

Cory Empting, just 37, has been making the wines since 2007, following his five-year apprenticeship under director of winegrowing Bob Levy, 62. Levy has been working with Harlan since 1984, when he started making the wines for Harlan's then-fledgling Merryvale winery. (Harlan sold Merryvale in 1996.) General manager Don Weaver has been with Harlan since the start as well.

Today Harlan, 78, and his team are still looking ahead, but with a generation of vintages under their belt, they can do so with a better idea of where they are going. Vintages that produced overt, full-throttled wines such as 1997 have become benchmarks as much for what *not* to do as what *to* do.

"In retrospect, '97 might have been a bridge too far," says Weaver as we discuss the Harlan wines of past years vis-à-vis their present-day counterparts. "But you still have to build that bridge too far to understand what is on the other side."

As for Empting, the focus now is on a style that exhibits some restraint, though that restraint is a function of the vineyard's maturity, and less the winemaker's hand.

"I think we're more confident now to pull the trigger early [on picking]," says Empting. "In the '90s, there were a lot of young vines and a lot of exploration of ripeness."

"And there hasn't been a big, sweeping sudden change," adds Weaver. "It's been small steps, greater detail along the way and vine age has a lot to do with that."

"There's no target vintage," says Empting. "We don't want to make wines that have already been made. Everything changes. We want to keep moving forward."

There's change in the vineyard too, with modern technology allowing Empting to increase the vine density in some of the terraces.

While there may be no target vintage per se, there is clearly a target: quality. Harlan and his namesake winery have earned their place among Napa's elite because they have always exhibited an exacting attention to detail while taking a methodical and long-term approach. And Harlan and his team remain as focused on that target and approach as ever.

WineSpectator.com members: Stay tuned for James Molesworth's tasting notes on several recent vintages of Harlan Estate Cabernets, coming soon.

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