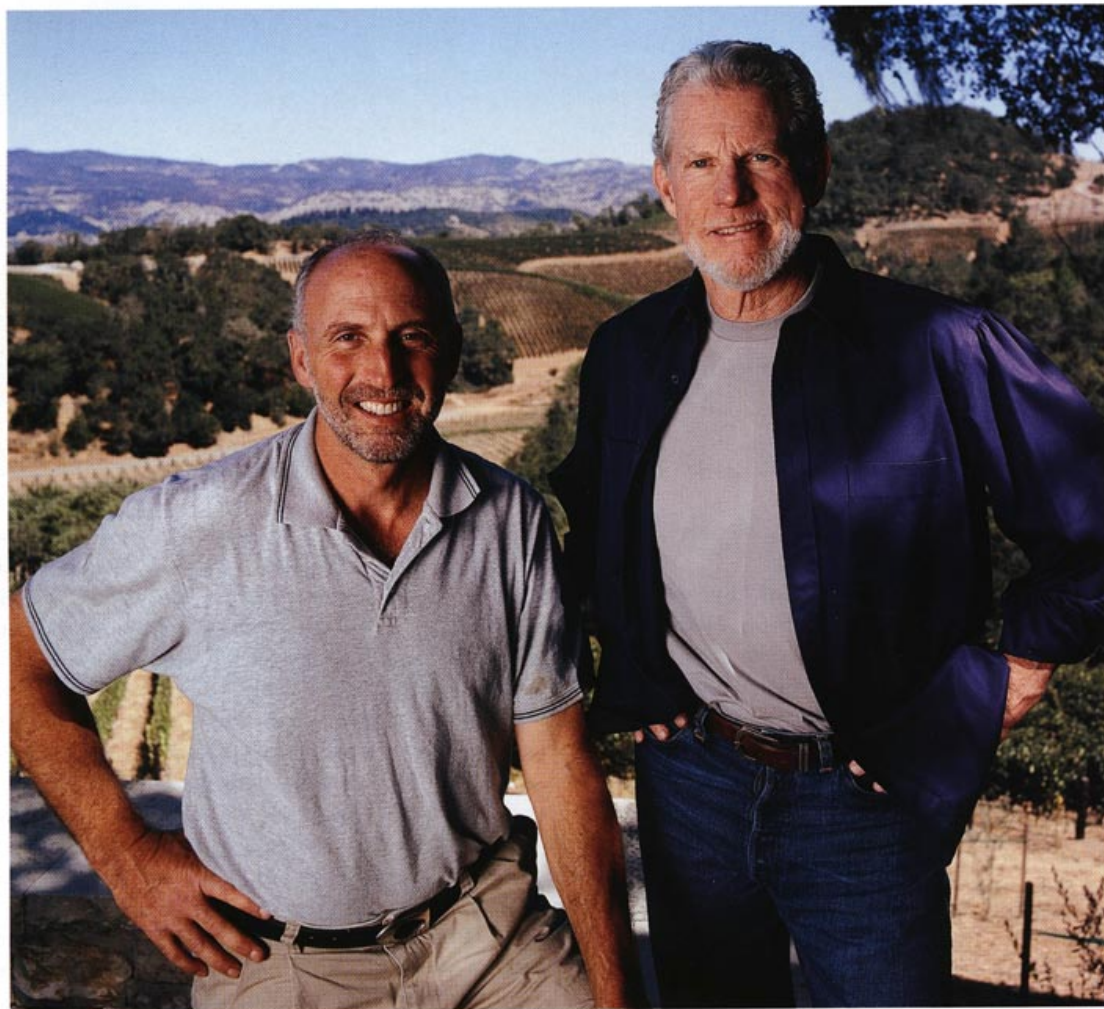


Harlan's New Bond

A perfectionist vintner sees room to grow



Bill Harlan, right, and Bob Levy are leveraging their relationship with various independent growers to produce proprietary wines under the Bond label. Their first bottlings will be out next spring.

Bill Harlan has few peers when it comes to the pursuit of excellence in Cabernet Sauvignon. He created one of Napa Valley's leading cult Cabernets at Harlan Estate in the 1990s, and his latest venture, called Bond, adds a new wrinkle to his approach to the Napa Cabernet scene.

While the focus at Bond is on single-vineyard sites, the wines won't carry vineyard designations. Instead, they will go by proprietary names. That will allow Harlan, 62, and his longtime winemaker Bob Levy, 47, the flexibility to blend if necessary. "Nine out of 10 times, the wines will probably be 100 percent [from one vineyard]," says Levy. But there are years—even great years—when some vineyards don't produce stellar wines because of their locale, Levy explains. In those

instances, he might blend in grapes or wine from another vineyard.

Bond also represents a new stage of vineyard management for Bill Harlan. While Harlan Estate uses estate-grown grapes for its two wines—Harlan Estate and The Maiden—Bond will rely on the relationship between its winemaking staff and independent growers. Harlan likens Bond to a covenant between them.

Harlan's love affair with Napa Cabernet dates to his years as a student at University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s. He is now entering his third decade as a Napa vintner; in addition to 17 years with Harlan Estate, he was among the original founders of Merryvale Vineyards. The steely-eyed perfectionist figures that there's still plenty of room for more great Napa

Bond's winery is the former home of Harlan Estate. The older label now occupies a new facility on a nearby knoll, but much about the two wineries is similar.



Cabernet, even as the wine market slows from the go-go days of the 1990s.

Harlan credits Levy with the concept for Bond. Working together at Merryvale, they purchased grapes from 60 different vineyards and found some that deserved to be singled out and made into stand-alone wines. Bond has long-term evergreen contracts with its growers to manage the vineyards, along with their proprietary interests in the wine names.

Still, they are in the process of fine-tuning relationships. Vineyard owners often have strong feelings about how to manage their properties, Harlan says. It takes time to agree on what's best for a vineyard, right down to rootstock, clone and crop loads. The pivotal factor to Bond's success, says Harlan, will be how well the winery staff and the growers work together. "We want to ensure the highest quality viticultural care in each vineyard," says Harlan.

Harlan rarely jumps into new ventures without studying them in depth. He spent more than 15 years looking for the right site for his winery, eventually choosing land in Oakville west of Martha's Vineyard; he made wine from the Harlan vineyard for several years before he felt the quality merited a commercial release. Experimental wines were first made at Bond in 1997.

Harlan has given Bond its own winery. Last year, he built a new winery for Harlan Estate, a 2,500-case operation that taps the winery's 36 acres of rolling hillside vineyards that are planted to Bordeaux varieties. Bond now occupies the winery formerly used to produce Harlan Estate. The two wineries are within view of one another, perched on knolltops on land owned by Harlan. The

winery are surrounded by steep, rock-strewn vineyards.

The setups of the two wineries are similar in key ways. Both use a mix of stainless steel and oak uprights for fermentations; Harlan uses more oak, Bond more steel. Yet there are differences as well: All the Harlan Estate wines are cellared in one *chai*; at Bond, there are six different cellar rooms within the winery, one for each of the new wines. Bond's capacity is 6,000 cases. Bond also serves as a sort of experimental lab, where Levy can try new techniques, and will provide Harlan with a training ground for the next generation of winemakers.

Bond's first two 1999 Cabernets, called Vecina and Melbury, are scheduled for release next spring (priced around \$150 a bottle), at the same time the '99 Harlan Estate (97 points, \$200) is released. True to Harlan's and Levy's high standards, the two new wines are excellent; I rated each in the 90-94 point range.

The 1999 Melbury (225 cases) is rich and chocolaty, with fine-grain tannins. It comes from Paul and Mary Slawson's steep, rocky, 7-acre Cabernet vineyard west of Lake Hennessy, the area east of Napa Valley where vineyards such as Bryant Family and David Arthur are located.

The 1999 Vecina (225 cases) comes from a hillside vineyard in Oakville owned by Vine Hill Ranch proprietor Bob Phillips. It is a shade more elegant than the Melbury, with spicy currant, lavender and anise and fine, integrated tannins.

In addition, a 2001 wine from St. Eden, Pam and Richard Kramlich's 11-acre Cabernet vineyard on a knoll in Oakville along the eastern side of the valley close to Silverado Trail, is planned. And Harlan hopes to add three more vineyards to the Bond lineup. —J.L.