

WINE ENTHUSIAST

M A G A Z I N E

AMERICAN WINERY

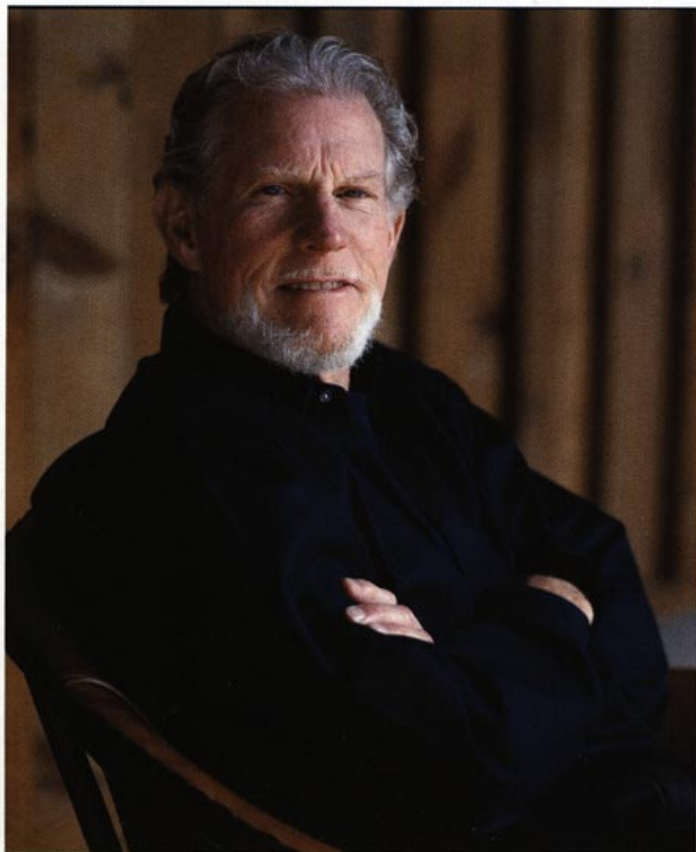
Harlan Estate

Pioneer Bill Harlan proves there's a soul to soil and climate

"We started with a vision, to create a first-growth winegrowing estate in California, and that's still our unending commitment."

Bill Harlan is in the great hall at his winery, Harlan Estate, trying to put into words what drives him onward every day. He's aware of the near-universal kudos his wines get from critics, collectors and consumers, who say the wines approach perfection. That kind of praise makes him squirm.

"There's no such thing as 'perfect,'" he retorts. "People say practice makes perfect. Well, it doesn't. Practice makes prudent."



PHOTOS STEVEN ROTHFELD; BOTTLES ROBERT BRUNO

Before the wine existed, there was Bill Harlan's vision. More than any other great winery in America, Harlan Estate is proof that terroir includes not just climate, soil and the rest of the technical details, but also the mind behind. At Harlan Estate, the team, most visibly led by winemaker Bob Levy and general manager Don Weaver, keeps the train on track. But the inspiration, the relentless perfectionism, the source of the original vision was, and distinctly remains, Bill Harlan.

A CUT ABOVE

Many wealthy people in Napa Valley have started up wineries. Money can make good wine, but only up to a point. Beyond that, it's not so much the size of the bank account as the shape of the personal aesthetic that matters. Thus, when *Wine Enthusiast* recognizes Harlan Estate as the American Winery of the Year, we do so, not just for the scores—although they're impressive enough; not just for the authority the wines hold in the public eye—unprecedented for any winery in America; and not just for the reverence that even so many winemakers at competing wineries have for Harlan Estate.

At 66, Bill Harlan maintains the lanky frame of the Southern California surfer he used to be. After a stint at U.C. Berkeley, where he played water polo, Harlan gravitated to San Francisco. In North Beach, he rubbed up against the counter-culture, developing an appetite for Kerouac and Camus and distilling from their existentialism the concept that would drive him for the rest of his life: "the edge."

It was a notion of living to the fullest, never settling for mediocrity, pushing envelopes past the point of bursting even when—especially when—doing so involved risk. (He once flew an airplane underneath the Golden Gate Bridge.)

But forces were gathering in and around Harlan that nudged him toward his future direction. In 1966, he happened to be in Napa Valley the day Robert Mondavi opened his winery. Watching the ceremonies under the now-famous arch and campanile, Harlan remembers thinking, "There's an opportunity for a guy to create his own winery from scratch."

