

Rebecca Laird, General Manager

Laird Family Estate Vineyards and Winery
5055 Solano Avenue, Napa

On a normal day in October, 100 to 120 tons of fruit arrive at Laird Family Estate to be made into wine, but just 20 tons were coming in the morning of this interview in a year of what Rebecca Laird describes as two harvests: the one in September and a second in October. The Laird family has grown wine grapes in Napa Valley since the 1970's. Rebecca's parents, Ken and his wife Gail, came to the Valley for a weekend in the late 1960's, and Ken didn't want to leave. He owned a successful welding and plumbing supply business and he and his family lived in the East Bay, but now all he wanted to do, as a trained mechanical engineer, was grow grapes. He began looking for land and in 1970 bought 70 acres off

Tubbs Lane in Calistoga for \$150,000. Ken knew nothing about grapes and the land was in prunes. As his daughter Rebecca tells it, after her father's banker laughed at the idea of lending him money, Ken took out the local telephone book and got as far as Robert Mondavi Winery. When Ken called, Bob Mondavi took the call. He came, walked the property with Ken, and struck a deal: Ken planted half his land to Gamay and half to Cabernet Sauvignon, and Mondavi bought its fruit for twenty years.

Everyone in the Laird family worked the property growing up. All four kids say they hated it then but now all feel darned lucky to have spent every weekend, holiday and vacation helping in the field. In the 1980's Ken focused on Los Carneros. The family moved to Napa Valley full-time in 1982. By the 1990's, the Lairds' Bayview Vineyards Farming Company owned or leased two thousand acres of vineyard and was responsible for six or seven thousand tons of fruit from 42 vineyards, 41 in Napa County and one in Sonoma (25 in Los Carneros). Rebecca says Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were the genesis of Laird.

In the mid to late 1990's Ken saw a shift in how business was done in the Valley. The once common ten-year contracts

were gone, replaced by ones renewed each year. Ken envisioned a winery for growers that would allow them to recoup their farming costs, a place where growers could come and share their concerns, bring any unsold fruit and have it processed for bulk wine. In 1998, as building his winery got underway, Ken invited Rebecca to oversee construction and run the business. At the time, Rebecca had been with Macy's

Department Store for fifteen years and was a buyer for men's suits and sport coats. She laughingly says she joined Laird Family Estates just as dress-down Fridays came in.

Laird's first permit was for 2,000 tons of fruit and fifteen clients. Before the winery was even built Merryvale came and asked to lease half for their Starmont



label. Their St. Helena winery could not get any larger, hemmed in by the town as it is, and the winery for Starmont in Napa wasn't ready. Starmont would be at Laird seven or eight years before its own winery opened. Winemaker Paul Hobbs also needed a place for his own brand, Lewis Cellars and DuMol. In just two years, Laird was full.

Napa County has since changed its ruling on custom crush clients. Now there may be any number but a winery may only produce the number of gallons its permit allows. Currently, Laird has twenty-five consulting winemakers for sixty-two clients (more than half are Alternating Proprietorships) and takes in 3,000 tons of fruit. Laird doesn't handle sparkling wines—it hasn't the bottling capability—and its permit limits the amount of alcohol in the wines, so it doesn't do dessert wines either, just red and white still wines.

Laird is best-known for making Bordeaux varieties, which Rebecca says only makes sense since it serves mostly Napa producers and Napa is known for Bordeaux varieties. 80 percent of Laird's production is in Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Winemakers at Laird include Mia Klein of Selene, Alison Green Doran with

Jocelyn Lonen, Mark Aubert and Celia Welch Masyczek. The Laird Family Estate's own first vintage was 1999 when it produced 3,000 cases of Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet with Paul Hobbs, winemaker. Production is now at 12,000 cases and also includes Pinot Noir, Pinot Grigio, Syrah and a proprietary blend. Just two percent of the Laird's Bayview Vineyards Farming Company fruit goes into the Laird label. The other 98 percent is sold throughout Napa Valley. Rebecca says Laird benefits from thirty years of growing grapes in the Valley. Colleagues help with the branding, marketing and making of their wine.

An average vineyard lot for Laird is five to eight tons. Assuming 62 cases to a ton, that's 300 to 400 cases per lot, and lot size dictates tank size, which determines the location for fermentation and storage. In 2001, Laird initiated its 30,000 sq. ft. West Wing expansion for fermentation and barrel storage. It also owns and operates Andretti Winery, leasing a tasting room to Andretti and using the winery for making wine from small red lots that are barreled there or at Laird, and aged at Laird where room for more fermentation and barrel storage is in the planning stages. All wines at Laird are bottled in-house by a bottling line. For five years the Laird

bottling truck earned its keep traveling to other wineries before staying put in 2005.

Despite its growth, Rebecca says Laird is still very much a small community. Farming, after all, is about helping each other out. Rebecca thinks most producers in the 20,000 case range will consider building a winery, but with less than that a facility like Laird makes sense. Laird wants to be the long-term home for smaller brands. "It never kicks anyone out," Rebecca laughs, and says there is a great exchange of information and experience among its twenty-five consulting winemakers: "Once we learn how to work with the winemaker, it's easy; we grow together." Examples of custom crush clients who have grown up and out are Paul Hobbs and Ann Colgin besides Merryvale's Starmont.

Laird is run on a first come, first serve basis. Clients have a press choice of 12 or 15 programs. A client may bring in fruit or buy from Laird. The contract outlines standard procedure and costs. A written recipe for making wine is required—absolutely no verbal instructions are taken. At crush, the winery is staffed by 71; only 41 are needed at non-crush. Lab analysis is included in the contract with a choice of using the in-house lab or outside verification. Laird can

accommodate most work order requests (with consequent added costs) such as an extra pumlover or a sorting table where ten women pick out leaves, sticks, spiders and raisins. Laird will even truck finished wine to a warehouse for a client. Custom crush clients supply their own barrels, racks and bungs as well as bottling supplies of glass, corks, caps and labels. Laird's two production managers are former winemakers, from Murphy Goode and Inglenook/Buena Vista. There is also a full-time compliance officer for all county, state and federal permit and license issues. Maintenance supervisor at the winery is Rebecca's husband and her brother Justin is oversees all vineyard operations. There are 400 hands in the vineyard at harvest, but just 60 or 70 hands year-round.

Rebecca used to do all the traveling to promote Laird because it was like pulling teeth to get her father for winemakers' dinners and other events. Ken would much rather sit on a tractor. Eventually Rebecca hired a national sales manager to travel for the brand, which has worked out well. Rebecca does the easier, local events. She is also researching and keeping an eye on the bulk wine business. In 2005, when there was lots of fruit, the bulk wine market grew for Napa Valley grapes not under contract,



and now is quite important. If someone wants to buy Chardonnay fruit from Laird at \$2,600 a ton, for instance, in nine months in the futures market it could be worth more as bulk wine. Rebecca enjoys this kind of challenge at Laird. ■