

Maestro on the Mountain

Laurel Glen's Cellar Philosopher Combines Wine Growing, Music in the Sonoma Valley

By James Laube
Glen Ellen, Calif.

Standing inside his winery, propped up on his crutches, Patrick Campbell speaks of wine and his academic interest in it. He is a Harvard University master's graduate who studied the philosophy of religion and lived in a Zen Buddhist commune near here. Today the owner of Laurel Glen vineyard and winery lives the life of a modern-day farmer-philosopher.

He does not pray to Bacchus for spiritual guidance or study the stars for the ideal time to harvest. But he does on occasion meditate and contemplate his agrarian existence. He also talks of personal enlightenment through introspection, yet allows, "A little adversity in life brings greater rewards in the end."

For Campbell, it all adds up to a fulfilling and inspirational lifestyle here in Sonoma Valley.

"There is a simplicity in Zen Buddhism that has allowed me to focus in on one thing and not be distracted," he says. "I would rather, for example, concentrate on one thing at the winery than experiment in the lab with different ideas. Perhaps I'm also more intuitive about life, about my vineyard and winemaking than I am into chemical analysis."

A New Vocation

In 1977 Campbell decided to focus his energy on a new vocation and bought a Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard planted in reddish soil on the east slope of Sonoma Mountain.

Four years later, in 1981, after learning that selling grapes wasn't very profitable, he started his own winery. Earlier this year he released his first vintage, and it has received many glowing reviews.

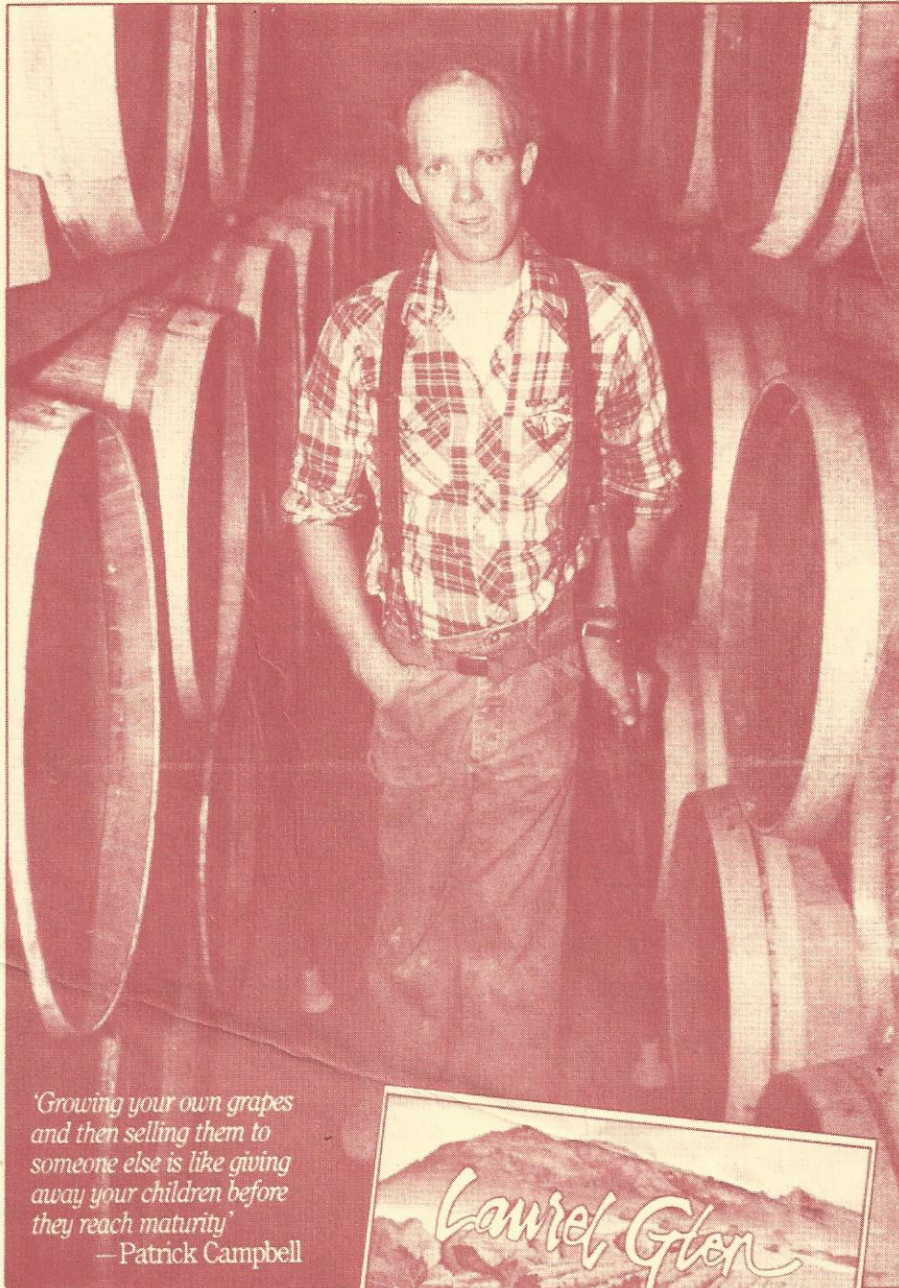
"I thought it was pretty damn good," he says, blushing and smiling like a proud new father. Priced at \$12.50, the wine offers ripe, concentrated cherry-cassis fruit character and has sold very well. This pleases Campbell, who spent considerable time marketing the wine before its release.

Moreover, brisk sales help ease the financial strain of holding a wine for four years before release. The 1982 Laurel Glen Cabernet, a slightly firmer wine with more acidity and fresh plummy Cabernet flavors, is now being released at the same price. Both wines are drinkable now, but are balanced and structured for aging.

High atop Sonoma Mountain, a dormant volcano in Sonoma Valley, Campbell, 38, glides through his neatly manicured vineyard on crutches before hoisting himself up on his tractor. This time of year he usually starts his day on the seat of a tractor, disking his 30-acre vineyard while it's cool, before the summer temperatures climb to the 90s.

Not far behind is his ever-loyal companion Lad, a husky, furry golden retriever who follows his every move and likes to chomp on ripe clusters of Cabernet grapes during harvest.

Clad in dusty, faded blue jeans, a plaid shirt and a baseball cap, Campbell looks and dresses like a grape grower except for the crutches. Handicapped by polio as a child, he has no use of his legs. He makes his way around the vineyard and winery with the aid of two crutches, yet manages the vineyard and winery operation, farming chores and all, with the help of one assistant and his own hands and arms.



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—Patrick Campbell

Philosopher and Musician

Campbell often rises at 5 a.m. to practice his viola for an hour before heading out to the vineyard. An accomplished musician, he is a member of the Santa Rosa Symphony Orchestra, and performs with that group twice a month.

A native of Baltimore, Campbell is the son of a Johns Hopkins University history professor. His family moved to Southern California when he was a teenager and he attended Pomona College, earning a degree in English.

His interest in theological studies led him to Harvard, where he studied philosophy and religion. "I got that out of my system and looked at teaching," he says of completing his master's degree. He never made it to the

classroom. Instead, his interest turned to classical music and he switched from guitar to violin.

In 1973 he moved back to California, landing in the Bay Area before finally settling in the tiny Sonoma Valley hamlet of Boyes Hot Springs. Here he worked as a musician, playing for four different orchestras.

During this time, he became interested in Zen Buddhism and moved into a small commune, where he lived for three years before meeting his wife, Faith. They were married in 1977 and have three daughters.

The Buddhist commune owned 80 acres and a small vineyard, and Camp-

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bell took an immediate interest in caring for the vines. "I knew I was never going to be good enough to get into a major metropolitan orchestra," he says, "so I began to think about grape growing."

He and Faith learned that the Laurel Glen vineyard, then about 13 acres, was for sale, and they bought it.

"The wine business is not as altruistic as grape growing," Campbell says, "and for a while I was not attracted to winemaking."

The name Laurel Glen appeared on Cabernets made by Chateau St. Jean from 1975 to 1977. From 1978 to 1980, Campbell sold his grapes to another leading Sonoma Valley winery, Kenwood Vineyards, which used the grapes for its top-of-the-line Artist Series Cabernet.

But then financial realities began to settle in.

"I started doing spread sheets and realized I couldn't make a living doing this," he says of selling his grapes. Even after four years of getting top dollar for his crop, the numbers did not add up, no matter how he juggled them.

"Growing your own grapes and then selling them to someone else is like giving away your children before they reach maturity," he says. "It doesn't make sense. I realized what I was doing. I was providing the wine for someone else."

The more he thought about it, the more logical it seemed to take his future into his own hands and make his own wine. The concept of an estate dedicated to one wine appealed to him.

"Cabernet Sauvignon has always been my favorite wine and I like making one wine for the simplicity of it," he says. "I believe in the concept of an integrated system, where you concentrate on a single product from beginning to end. Business-wise, it also seemed more logical and efficient to focus on Cabernet and gradually build production from about 1,400 cases in 1981 to about 5,000 with the '84 harvest."

"I really enjoy it now," he says. "I'm at a size where I can make as much money as someone who makes 30,000 cases. I'm set up where I can concentrate on one wine and not have to compromise quality. I can pick the grapes exactly when I want to. I grow the grapes, so the quality should be good. I pay my pickers by the hour and I field-crush the grapes, so they're as fresh as they can be. I watch every grape that goes in. There couldn't be more than five minutes between when they're picked and when they're crushed."

What's more, he says, "I don't subscribe to the theory that you need to stress your vines to make a great wine. If they need water, I'll water."

Fresh, Intense, Ripe and Tannic

Campbell wants his wines to be tight and focused with fresh, intense fruit flavors. He likes his grapes ripe and tannic but not astringent. He uses all new French oak barrels for aging, likes to rack the wines often for aeration and fines with egg whites.

"What I'm trying to do is make a wine that is consistent from year to year," he says. "Some may like it, some may not, but I think if it's consistent enough people are going to like it."

So far enough people have liked Laurel Glen's Cabernet to keep Campbell happy. But he has high hopes for his vineyard and some bold predictions about the future of Sonoma Valley Cabernet in general.

"I think ultimately our Cabernet will be better than those in Napa Valley because it's cooler here," he says of Sonoma Valley, which is closer to the Pacific Ocean's cooling breezes than neighboring Napa, farther inland to the east.

Right now Sonoma Valley is perhaps better known for its outstanding wineries, like Chateau St. Jean, Kenwood, Hanzell and Grand Cru than for any one particular varietal. But vintners like Campbell think that is about to change and are working to do something about it.