

The Legacy of John Daniel

Lail Vineyards continues the glory of Inglenook

By **Mark Spivak** - May 27, 2021



Georgia 2018. Image courtesy of Lail Vineyards

Giants once roamed the earth. Toward the end of the 19th century, Inglenook was regarded as one of the world's great wine estates—a contemporary critic called it the California equivalent of Château Margaux. The winery had been founded by Gustav Niebaum in 1879, and a decade later the wines were winning gold medals at international expositions in Paris. He was the most innovative vintner of his time, and many believe that he created Napa Valley wine as we know it today.

Inglenook struggled after Niebaum's death in 1908. Production ceased for a while, then resumed until the property was shuttered during Prohibition. In 1936 ownership passed to John Daniel Jr., Niebaum's great-nephew, who restored Inglenook to its former glory. Daniel was a stickler for quality who focused on Cabernet Sauvignon, insisted on varietal labeling, and refused to sell any wine not up to his standards. He produced some of the legendary wines in Napa's history, particularly the 1941 Inglenook Cabernet, a bottle of which sold for nearly \$25,000 in 2017.

Before long, however, Inglenook was struggling again. While the standard explanation is that Daniel's obsession with quality proved to be his undoing, the truth may be that he was simply making a product the public didn't understand and wasn't ready for. He sold to United Vintners in 1964, which promptly reduced Inglenook to an inferior, low-priced jug wine. Sadly, this is how many consumers remember it.



*Erin and Jon Lail with
Erin's niece Wells Casten.*



Robin Lail, photo by Art Clarity

Daniel's legacy today is carried on by his daughter, Robin Daniel Lail, who established her own winery and family legacy. Her resumé is nearly as impressive as her father's: she was a co-founder of Dominus, started Merryvale with Bill Harlan, and helped create Auction Napa Valley. The Lail wines made their debut in 1995, crafted by superstar winemaker Philippe Melka, and have garnered critical acclaim ever since. Her distinctive Sauvignon Blanc, Georgia, is at the top of the range, along with the J. Daniel Cuvée Cabernet Sauvignon sourced from prime vineyards in a range of appellations (not the original Inglenook vineyards—for better or worse, those are in the hands of Francis Ford Coppola).

Once you get over sticker shock, the 2018 Georgia (\$150) is a remarkable experience. Grown on a dry farmed, three-acre site in Yountville, it is fermented and aged for 18 months in French oak barrels. The complex nose yields whiffs of minerals, wet hay, lemon zest and grapefruit. On the palate, the wine is a lean and focused powerhouse, with mouthwatering acidity, flavors of citrus and green apple, a strong mineral underpinning, and a long, peppery finish. While the pedigree is California, the style brings to mind Domaine de Chevalier Blanc.

In its own way, the 2018 J. Daniel Cuvée is no less memorable. A fragrant nose of crushed blackberries, fresh herbs, graphite, mocha and new oak paves the way for a wine that is both sumptuous and well-proportioned. The tannins are supple, the generous and opulent texture is offset by good acidity, and the black fruit flavors build to a crescendo on the finish. Very seldom do you find a newly released Napa Cabernet this enjoyable and ready to drink. Papa would be proud.

Mark Spivak specializes in wine, spirits, food, restaurants and culinary travel. He is the author of several books on distilled spirits and the cocktail culture, as well as three novels. His latest release, *Impeachment*, is now available on Amazon.



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