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Lail Vineyards J. Daniel Cuvée 2001–2019

Most industries are composed of either blueprint makers or blueprint followers. The wine industry is no different, even if the sets of blueprints are as diverse as the myriad of grape-growing regions, varieties, and styles around the world. In Napa Valley, there are few remaining blueprint makers. Coming from a rich history of blueprint makers, Robin Lail is one.



[The Wine Independent](#)
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Blueprint

Robin's great-granduncle was Gustave Niebaum, who established the Inglenook winery in Rutherford in 1879. Her father, John Daniel, Jr., was raised on the estate by his great-aunt Susan Niebaum (Gustave's widow) after his mother passed away. Following the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, John reopened Inglenook, and in 1936 he took over the estate. In 1940, Robin was born; she was also raised on the estate. A few years later, John purchased the Napanook Vineyard in Yountville to fold into the Inglenook estate. But when he sold Inglenook to Allied Grape Grower in 1964, Robin and her sister Marcia maintained ownership of the Napanook Vineyard.

After graduating from Stanford University, Robin embarked on a wine career journey that is nothing short of epic.

This included a stint as the personal assistant to Robert Mondavi and organizing the first Auction Napa Valley, which was to become Napa Valley's most successful annual event in support of nonprofit organizations in Napa County. In 1982, sisters Robin and Marcia partnered with Bordeaux winemaker/property owner Christian Moueix to form Dominus Estate out of the Napanook Vineyard. In 1983, Robin co-founded Merryvale Vineyards with Bill Harlan, where she served as president for ten years. In 1995, sisters Robin and Marcia were bought out of Dominus by Christian Moueix. Soon after, Robin sold out of her partnership at Merryvale Vineyards, but not before embarking on a bright new chapter in her career.

Robin, her husband Jon, and daughters Erin and Shannon launched Lail Vineyards in 1995, appointing a young former French winemaking intern from Dominus as their winemaker: Philippe Melka. Lail was one of Melka's first clients for what was to become a long and very successful career as one of Napa Valley's foremost winemaking consultants. The first vintage of Lail's flagship wine, the J. Daniel Cuvée, was 1995.



Earlier this year, I sat with Robin Lail and Philippe Melka to taste every vintage of the J. Daniel Cuvée made since 2001.

"2001 was really the transition year for the J. Daniel Cuvée," said Philippe Melka. "This is when it became 100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Before this, it was mainly Merlot. Since that date, only one year (2004) included a little Merlot."

The 2001-2003 vintages of this cuvée were a blend of their estate-owned Mole Hill Vineyard on Howell Mountain and Vine Hill Ranch. Since then, top sites in Calistoga, Yountville, Stags Leap District, and Coombsville have been incorporated.

"The only vineyard that has been a constant in the blend since 1995 is Vine Hill Ranch," said Philippe. "We have used fruit from this vineyard every year."

Production of this label is usually under 1000 cases, and, except for 2 vintages (2004 and 2012), it is 100% Cabernet Sauvignon.

"2001 was really the transition year for the J. Daniel Cuvée."



We also tasted a vertical of the Lail's Georgia—a single vineyard Sauvignon Blanc and one of Napa Valley's finest examples of this grape.

"The Georgia label is named after my oldest granddaughter," said Robin. "We own the vineyard that we use for this. It was once part of the Inglenook estate and is called the Totem vineyard. It is a little piece (2.66 acres) that sits in front of the Napa Valley Lodge, and which was cut off from the main vineyard. It used to be planted to Merlot and was used in the blend for the J. Daniel Cuvée. However, in 2006 we t-budded it over to Sauvignon Blanc. The rootstock was planted in 1986. It is all dry grown, but in 2021 and 2022, the vineyard really struggled, so we may need to rethink this."

Philippe Melka commented that they had thought about adding Sémillon to Georgia, "But it doesn't have the necessary acidity in Napa, unlike in Bordeaux. We do use about 10% of the Sauvignon Blanc Musqué clone in the 'blend,' knowing that we are going to age this wine for nearly two years in barrel, mostly new oak."

"Wine, at its best, is about people."

Finally, we tasted the current releases of Lail's entry-level labels: 2019 Blueprint Cabernet Sauvignon and 2021 Blueprint Sauvignon Blanc.

"The Blueprint label was created to honor my husband, Jon, who is such a caring and protective citizen and an architect here in Napa Valley. He has designed more than 50 wineries and over 100 wine cellars. Now we call it 'Blueprint for change,' which is directed towards climate change. 10% of our sales of these wines, which are direct to the consumer, go to a charity helping to fight climate change. Last year we donated to Climeworks, which is looking to extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. We think what you put on your labels should say something about who you are. After all, wine, at its best, is about people."



Blueprint

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2019 Lail Vineyards J Daniel Cuvee Cabernet Sauvignon

2019 ↕

100



Lail Vineyards

Lail's 2019 J. Daniel Cuvee Cabernet Sauvignon is deep garnet-purple in color. It needs a little shaking before it erupts with flamboyant notes of warm cassis, wild blueberries, and black raspberries, followed by an opulent undercurrent of jasmine tea, candied violets, and star anise, plus a touch of rose oil. The full-bodied palate is densely packed and multi-layered, featuring firm, velvety tannins and just enough freshness, finishing with incredible length and depth.

Reviewed by: **Lisa Perrotti-Brown**

Review date: **2023-03-22**

Source: **Lail Vineyards J. Daniel Cuvée 2001-2019**

2019 Lail Vineyards

Georgia Sauvignon Blanc

2019 ↕



Lail Vineyards

96 +

Lail's 2019 Georgia Sauvignon Blanc needs a bit of swirling to unlock notes of apple sauce, lemon tart, and apricots, followed by hints of wet slate and salted almonds. The medium to full-bodied palate delivers a decadently satiny texture with dense, tightly wound stone fruit and citrus layers, finishing long and fruity.

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