VINEYARD HAVEN
One of Harlan's vineyards in the hills of Oakville, California. "I'm setting the table for the next generation," he says.

HARLAN RENAISSANCE

One vintner's tireless pursuit of first-growth-quality wine has drawn an obsessive cult following to his flagship brand. With a new venture, Promontory, Bill Harlan is one step closer to reaching his 200-year plan.

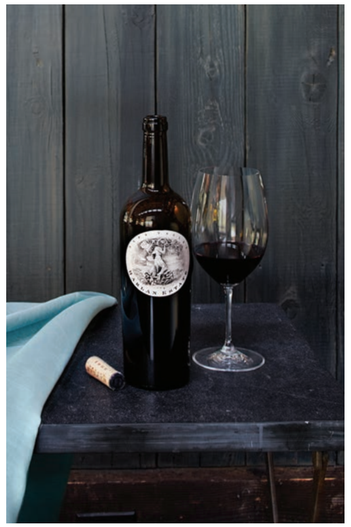
BY JAY CHESHES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESSE CHEHAK

THIS WHOLE AREA was pretty much passed over by the 20th century," says Bill Harlan, bumping along a rutted dirt track in an SUV. Six years ago, he stealthily purchased some 900 acres here in this overgrown corner of the Napa Valley—the original pioneer road to Sonoma runs right through them. "All of this was just brush when we acquired it," he says as we continue through the bramble past an old quicksilver-mining shack. Vineyards planted long ago among the thick forest never produced wine that amounted to much. Even so, Harlan was drawn to the land's rugged extremes, its unusual microclimate and mix of soil types, seeing value where others saw mostly inhospitable scrub. "There's no reason we shouldn't be able to produce wine here of greater quality than any we've done so far," he says.

Harlan doesn't do anything halfway. He already produces one of the most consistently celebrated red wines in the United States at his nearby Harlan Estate, its robust Bordeaux-style blend awarded 100-point scores (to five vintages) by the hugely influential Robert M. Parker, Jr. Parker refers to Harlan as a visionary who has "raised the goal post" in Napa Valley, producing vintages that rival "the greatest wines in France, Italy, wherever." But that is not enough.

For the past 30 years, the vintner has single-mindedly endeavored to raise the global profile of the Napa Valley itself. "This area has the potential to be a national treasure," he says, "of someday being recognized as one of the finest wine-growing regions in the world. That's why we're here and not somewhere else."

Like his flagship brand—which spent more than a decade in development before the first bottle shipped in 1996—Harlan's ambitious new venture has been germinating under the radar for years. This fall, the first vintage of Promontory, his new wine, will at last debut. It's still early days, but presumably the diversity of terroir and exposures will ultimately yield an even more complex blend.



"We have volcanic, sedimentary and metamorphic soils, and a whole area called the melange that's a mix," says Harlan. "Eventually we'll have 100 different plots that we'll manage, vinify and age separately." With fewer than 1,000 cases produced, the inaugural vintage is likely to sell out—by mailing list—well before its release date. "The volume will go up slowly over the next 20 years," says the former real-estate magnate, surveying the vast, rough terrain where the wine's Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot grapes are grown. "I'm setting the table, here, for the next generation."

Though Harlan, a lifelong athlete, is still in great shape at 73, lately he's been spending a lot of time pondering what sort of legacy he'll leave for his 27-year-old son, Will, who joined the family business a few years back, and his daughter, Amanda, a 24-year-old equestrian who recently announced her intention to come aboard after her horse suffered a debilitating tendon tear, dampening her Olympic ambitions. From the moment he entered the wine trade, Harlan has taken the long view, speaking of a 200-year plan and of building something truly enduring—an American wine dynasty—even before his heirs were born.

HARLAN IS THE SORT of character you might encounter in a Victorian novel—a former adventurer and adrenaline junkie turned country squire, naturalist and homespun philosopher. "I used to be 100 percent focused on the now," he says, "an exciting way to live, but there was no permanence, no future, no great fulfillment." Sporting a mane of flowing white hair and matching beard, he spins fantastic tales from the first half of his life—most impossible to verify but all hard to resist.

Harlan was raised in Southern California, in the Los Angeles suburb of Whittier, with two younger brothers and strict Christian parents. His father, who worked his way up from slaughterhouse floor to director of marketing at a meatpacking company, pushed his boys to be self-sufficient. After World War II, young Bill earned cash tending neighbors' victory gardens. In the mythic terms he now applies in hindsight, the seeds planted by that 6-year-old gardener would one day lead him back to the land as a vintner. "As a little kid, watching things grow, it's almost like magic," he says.

In the late '50s, after spending his teenage years surfing, lifeguarding and riding girls around on the back of his motorbike, Harlan attended UC Berkeley and became an Olympic hopeful on the Inland Empire water-polo team. He supported himself by playing in a regular card game and parking cars at Trader Vic's. In five years, he graduated with a bachelor's degree. "I never thought for a minute what I would do when I was done," he says.

After graduation, he embarked on what he hoped would be a round-the-world tour. Arriving in Morocco after a few months in Europe, he hitched a ride to Egypt with a Canadian and an Australian driving a VW bus. And so he began a year of thumbing his way across Africa, subsisting, he says, on "36 cents a day."

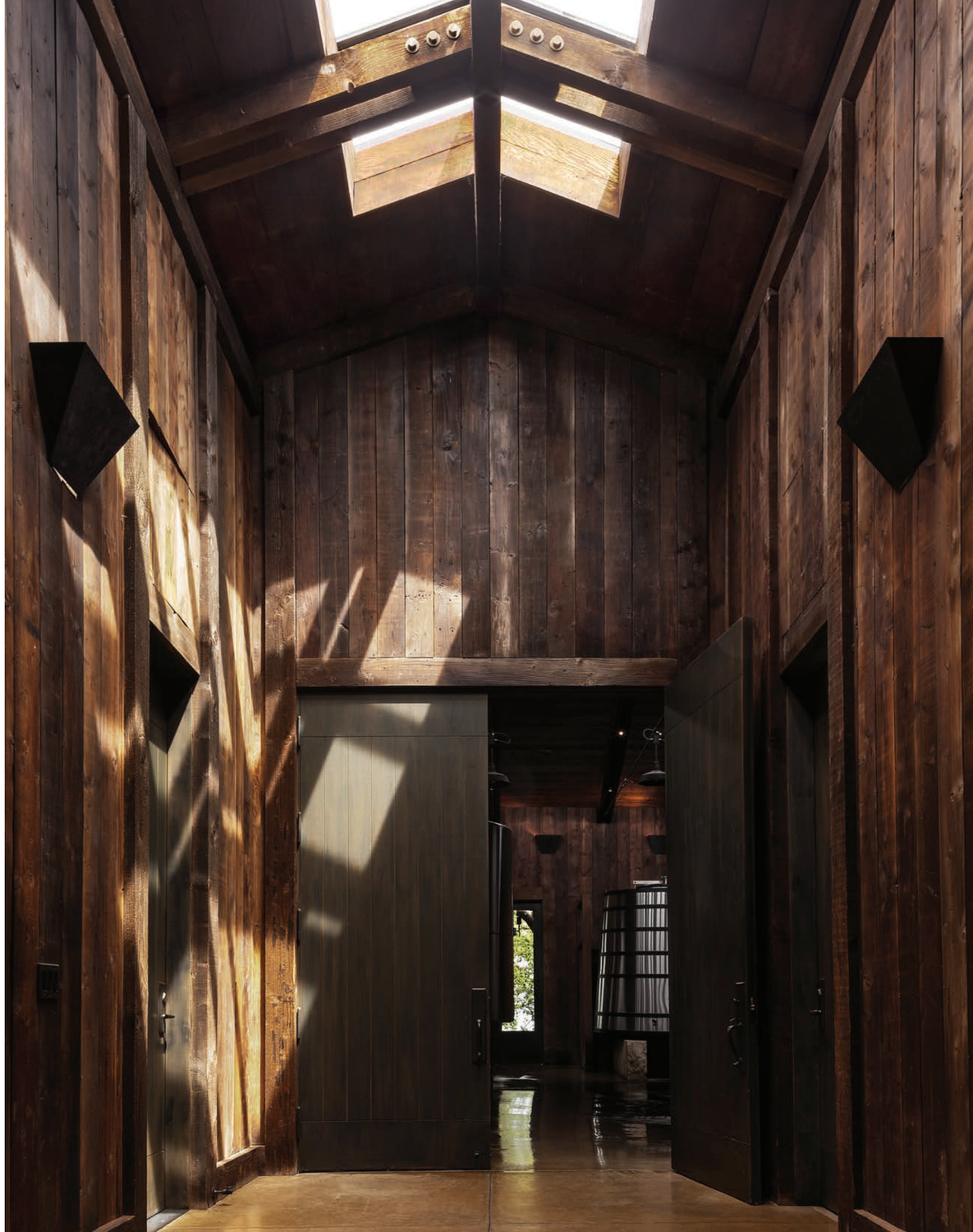
GENERATION NEXT Harlan with his son, Will, who oversees Mascot. Bottom: A bottle of 2009 Harlan Estate. Opposite: The fermentation room at Harlan Estate.

Along the way, Harlan picked up a copy of Alan Moorehead's *The White Nile*, the true story of swashbuckling figures such as Henry Morton Stanley and David Livingstone, who had followed the great river in the 19th century. He traced their trail south into the Sudan, traveling slowly by train ("stacked floor to ceiling with people") before hopping a potato-and-onion barge, eventually making it all the way to the Cape of Good Hope. "It was just stream of consciousness," he recalls, "always wondering where you were going to get food and where you were going to sleep that night."

Returning to Northern California, he moved from motorbike racing to daredevil flying—following an accident that blew out a knee—and landed a job at an airport selling flight lessons to pay for his own. "Every nickel I had I spent on flying," he says. As his confidence grew, he started "doing crazy things you shouldn't do," until a friend's fatal plane crash persuaded him to "back off for a while."

His attention turned from the sky to the sea. By 1968, Harlan had taken a job aboard a Stanford University marine-research vessel, where he fixed engines, taught diving and, in a very short period, he says, worked his way up to bosun. By then he started to consider taking up a more traditional career, because "the girls weren't going for a dollar jug of wine on the back of a motorcycle anymore." He decided to become a stockbroker.

"It's amazing, a lot of the things Bill's done; I'm just glad most of them were before we met," says Harlan's wife, Deborah, one spring afternoon



outside the magnificent home her husband built above the vineyards at Harlan Estate. A pair of Rhodesian Ridgebacks roughhouse on a manicured lawn, while in the distance a waterfall tumbles into a man-made lake.

By the time Deborah and Bill began seeing each other, he was a wealthy man whose impulsive behavior—motorbike racing, reckless flying and gambling (his suite at a Lake Tahoe casino was comped for nearly two years)—was mostly behind him. A short stint selling stocks had given way to a career in real-estate development. In the mid-1970s he launched his own firm, Pacific Union, with a former competitor, converting condominiums at first. Its success paid for the extravagant houseboat in Sausalito where Deborah, a New York actress visiting her parents in the East Bay, arrived for a blind date along with the couple who'd insisted they meet.

Harlan's floating bachelor pad—with its travertine floors, wine cellar, solarium and sauna—made a big impression, but initially, Harlan himself did not. "He was an hour and a half late," she recalls. "I was polite when he arrived, but I wouldn't say I was very warm." Despite an inauspicious beginning, Harlan's charms prevailed. The couple had a long-distance relationship for a year before marrying while on vacation in Italy. It was the mid-1980s. Bill Harlan's priorities were changing. He'd begun to think seriously about slowing down.

LIKE MANY OF Harlan's interests, his passion for wine had romantic beginnings. He discovered the Napa Valley while at Berkeley—wooing girls with drives in the country and free tastings. In 1966, he attended the opening of Robert Mondavi's winery, though back then he didn't think much about the business. Years later, selling recreational-home sites north of Napa, he'd drive through the still-sleepy wine region a few times a week. A poetic notion began taking shape, of one day settling down on a modest plot and starting his own winery.

Harlan has a gambler's knack for gaming the odds. When land he'd been trying to move wouldn't sell, he would trade it like poker chips—for small airplanes, boats, oriental rugs. On one transaction he scored a 100-foot Baltic Trader, a sturdy old sailboat he would later sail around the world. He drove up to Napa to seal the deal with its owner, vintner Carl Doumani, who at the time owned Stags' Leap. "That winery was like a dream," says Harlan. "It confirmed to me that I had to get on with finding my own."

With Doumani as his guide, he scoured the valley for his own 40 acres of heaven, the minimum required by law to launch a vineyard back then. One evening in 1979, after a long day "driving around, drinking wine," Doumani suggested a sunset daiquiri on the clubhouse deck at Meadowood, a failing country club on the verge of foreclosure. Harlan considered the wooded locale and decided, then and there, that he was the man to save it. Within 48 hours he had his first foothold in Napa, with no real idea about what he would do with a nine-hole golf course and a string of run-down cabins.

BOOK SMART One of three libraries at Harlan Estate houses dozens of volumes on winemaking through the ages.

Before long, word of Harlan's deal reached Robert Mondavi, who had been talking with friends about starting Napa's first charity wine auction. Meadowood, under new ownership, seemed an ideal venue. After floating the idea over lunch, he sweetened the pot, offering Harlan a whirlwind five-week tour of the great wine estates of Bordeaux and Burgundy—led by Mondavi's assistant—culminating in the famous charity auction that was the inspiration for the Napa event: the Hospices de Beaune. Awed by the wine dynasties he met there—with generations, and sometimes centuries, behind them—Harlan returned from the trip transformed.

Instead of simply launching another winery, Harlan had a different plan: to build a California equivalent of a Bordeaux first growth, producing wine that would command respect around the world from a terroir that would endure well after he'd gone. He knew the task wouldn't be easy, or quick. "Up until then, my thinking had all been fairly short-term," he says. "That was a pivotal point. I began to have a whole different perspective of time."

Auction Napa Valley launched at Meadowood the following summer, in 1981, and has been held ever since at what Harlan eventually transformed into the region's top luxury resort, home to one of California's finest restaurants (one of only two in the state with three Michelin stars).

In the early '80s, while still searching for land for his vineyard, Harlan began learning the winemaking ropes—hiring consultants, buying grapes, renting custom-crush space. His first wines, produced under the Merryvale label (named for the Pacific Union headquarters building in downtown San Francisco), were more business than passion. Still, they brought together the core winemaking team that remains with him today.

Many of the best wines in Europe, Harlan reasoned, come from grapes grown on slopes—and so he looked only at hillside plots. He wanted a place with the potential to produce "fantastic wine." Several years into the search he finally found it, rising up above a valley in Oakville.

"I wanted the winery to be hidden, not really obtrusive," says Harlan of the earth-tone building at Harlan Estate that blends into the landscape. A stone walkway, constructed from recycled remnants of a railroad roundhouse, wraps around the hill above undulating rows of terraced vines. Oak barrels, tucked in an underground cellar, hold some of the most coveted cult wine in the country. Even among the very few fortunate enough to get their hands on a bottle, not many have visited the place where it's produced—Harlan Estate is open to visitors by invitation only.

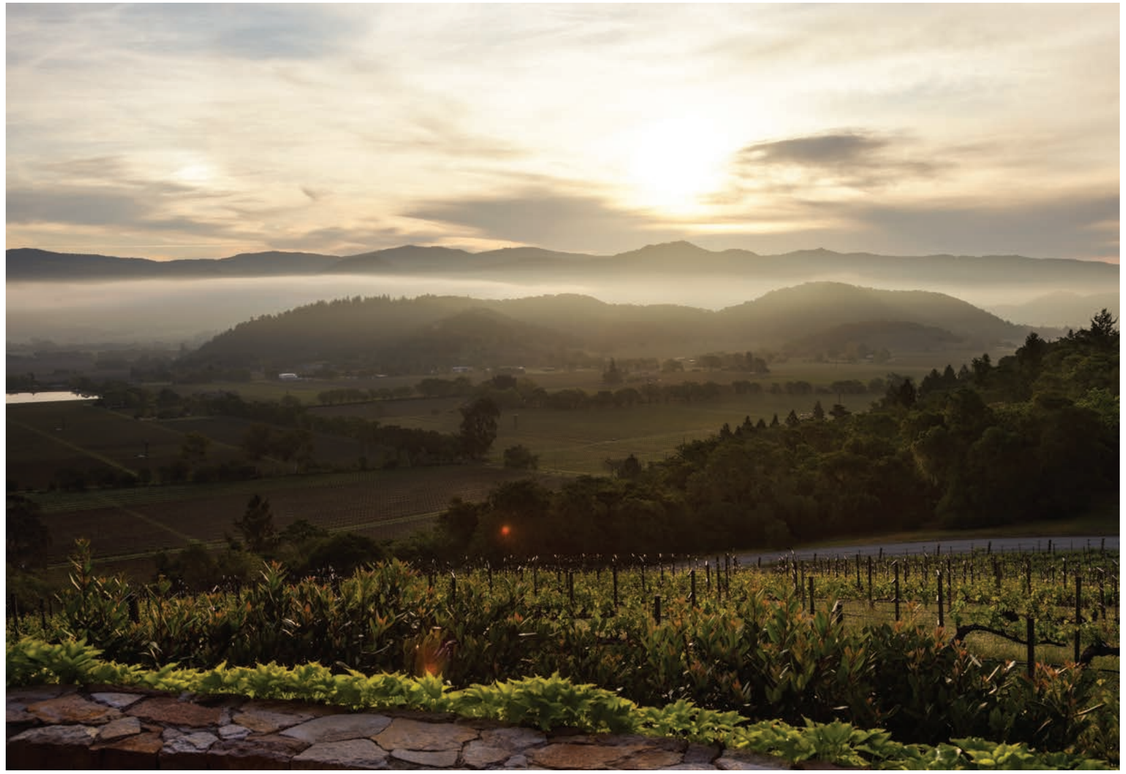
When Harlan acquired the place in 1984, it took a great leap of faith to imagine the setting as it is now. No grapes had ever been grown there—roads, water and electricity all had to be brought in. "It was just forest; you couldn't walk, couldn't move," he says. "I carried a big machete, just hacking away, to see what it looked like."

Clearing the land without destroying its natural beauty turned out to be a monumental endeavor, but within a year the first vines had been planted. In 1987, Bob Levy, a fourth-generation Californian like Harlan, began making wine from its grapes. The first vintage—and the next one, and the one after that—fell well short of Harlan's and his winemaker's expectations. "The wines had distinction but not greatness," says Levy. "I told Bill, 'This isn't what we should be launching a brand with.'" None of those vintages were ever released.

Harlan decided to bring in outside help. For the 1990 vintage, French consultant Michel Rolland—not yet a major voice on the international wine scene—helped turn things around (he has been involved in every vintage since). Harlan would wait six more years before putting up a single bottle for sale. "We wanted to have back-to-back vintages that were as good or better than the one before," he says. "I wanted to make sure we didn't miss."

In 1995, in anticipation of Harlan Estate's long-awaited debut, he invited critic Robert Parker in for a preview of the first three vintages, all slated for release the following year, at a then-exorbitant price of $65 a bottle. Parker's scores, published with the fax number for the mailing list—including 98 points for the 1991—led to all the wine selling out within days.

FIELD OF DREAMS Workers preparing rootstocks for grafting at Promontory. Opposite: A sunset on the Oakville corridor, which critic Robert Parker calls the "tenderloin" of Napa Valley, and which is home to Harlan's wineries.



In the 30 years since he bought his first 40 acres, Harlan has built a formidable presence in Napa Valley, scooping up parcels of its most coveted terroir. "After all the years I spent in Napa," says Parker, "tasting that corridor, going from the east-side hills, where you have some great wineries, right through the valley floor and up to the Mayacamas Mountains, where Harlan is, I really see that as the tenderloin of Napa Valley. The wines there just have an extra dimension, an extra complexity and a degree of richness."

In 2005 Harlan added the Napa Valley Reserve to his holdings, a members-only club where oenophiles—paying $150,000 and up to join—blend their own varietals, guided by Harlan's team. It's a short drive from the property to Harlan Estate and its sister winery, Bond (producing wines from grapes grown off-site). On a nearby hill, construction is underway on the new building to which production of Promontory—for now housed elsewhere in temporary quarters—is expected to shift by 2015. It will be the first, and only, Harlan facility open to the general public.

With this new winery and its nearby vineyards, Harlan insists his grand plan for the Napa Valley will finally be complete—though his team is not quite sure. "Bill is never happier than when he's building something; he's a developer by birth," says Harlan Estate director Don Weaver. "Promontory was a surprise for the rest of us. I thought it was time to just burnish the gem, when all of a sudden I hear him say, 'Well, there's this piece of land just south of us...'"

To ensure continuity, a few years back Harlan began urging his core team to start grooming successors. Bob Levy's protégé, former intern Cory Empting, has already taken a lead winemaking role. He's been increasingly working with Harlan's son, Will, who last year launched his own adjunct wine project, Mascot, an "on-ramp" to fine-wine appreciation, as he calls it, featuring a blend of young vines in his father's portfolio. At $75 per bottle (as opposed to the $750 Harlan Estate retails for), it's a wine that Will's friends can afford to uncork. He is promoting it heavily in Silicon Valley.

Both Harlan children took some time exploring other pursuits before returning to the fold. "I always had an open line of dialogue with my dad, but there was never any pressure to do anything," Will says. After college, he struggled with an online start-up—a price-comparison engine for outdoor gear he launched with a classmate from Duke ("the kayak.com for kayaks"). In between riding competitions, Amanda worked at a Los Angeles wine shop and in promotions for Dom Pérignon. "I wanted to have some of my own experiences before devoting the rest of my life to the family business," she says.

Their dad took a lot longer to find himself. The daredevil who once lived for the thrill of "not knowing what will happen in the next fraction of a second" has evolved into an introspective, inquisitive man. "He'll wander around the property asking a billion questions," says Empting. "He'll ask anybody anything."

In 2000 Harlan and his partner unloaded Pacific Union's lucrative mortgage and brokerage arms to GMAC. The company's remaining assets, farmed out to lieutenants, pretty much run themselves these days, allowing him to focus almost all of his energy on his true calling—his Napa Valley domain. "If you work on what you really love doing, it's not really work," he says in a reflective moment. "You have twice as much time to enjoy life.

"What we're really working on is the quest for the missing shade of red," he adds, "a wine that's never been experienced, that hasn't been produced yet. We have a very good chance of capturing it here." ●