



BOB FOLEY

ALL IN HIS OWN TIME

Ben Weinberg meets the irrepressible Bob Foley and finds a man still hungry for new challenges, despite his many achievements in California and beyond

On my first trip to Robert Foley Vineyards, I got lost. In my defense, that's an easy thing to do—Foley's place perches near the relatively remote, Seventh Day Adventist-dominated (and alcoholically dry) town of Angwin, which in turn snuggles up to the backside of Howell Mountain in northeastern Napa. In some ways, the location is ideal, sufficiently far from the hustle of Napa Valley yet close enough to drive in for dinner. It's also an absolutely fabulous area for Cabernet Sauvignon, where neighbors include Dunn Vineyards, Ladera Winery, Neal Family Vineyards, and Clark-Claudon Vineyards.

Howell Mountain is, however, quite hilly and meandering, with squiggly roads and scrubby forest vying for space with ordered rows of grapevines. For guidance, I had just a few notes jotted on the back of a used envelope and a GPS. But the road seemed to make a lot of extra turns, and my GPS faded in and out. By the time I found the gated entry, I was almost an hour late, as well as hungry, thirsty, and nearly incontinent.

There are several buildings on site, and of course the office was the last one I tried. I pushed through the door and skidded to a stop in the entrance. Catching my breath, I peered into the room beyond and saw the maverick Napa Valley winemaker sitting on the far side of a long, darkly finished oak table. He was surrounded by workers and interns, all of them tucking into a communal plate of sandwiches prepared by the local mega-mart.

Foley looked up at me, pointed to my right, and shouted, "Bathroom's down the hall!" Upon my return, he gave me a bottle of water and a turkey sandwich. "Dig in!" he enthused. "Plenty for all." It wasn't a great sandwich, but then, he really didn't need to feed me at all.

On my second visit, Foley again offered me a grocery-store sandwich. I wasn't hungry and turned it down, but we had a good time together, anyway. Then there was that third trip, when Kelly Peterson-Holmes, who manages her family's Peterson Family Vineyard (of Switchback Ridge fame), actually made me a sandwich and insisted I take it with me for the long ride to the Sacramento airport.

Naturally I scheduled my fourth trip—the one leading to this article—for just before lunchtime, with visions of roast beef and Cheddar dancing in my head. I arrive punctually, and Foley fidgets while I set up and test my equipment. I nod my readiness. He sits on the opposite side of the darkly burnished oak table and leans forward.

"It's been a tough few months," he barks, his steely, hazel eyes flashing. "Both hips replaced—one last November, and the other just a few weeks ago." He points through a nearby window toward a blue scooter parked outside. "Kelly Peterson bought me that contraption so I could get around. Faster than me hobbling but still too slow."

I look forlornly at the tabletop: "No sandwiches?" He scowls. "No time. Too much to do!" His intensity rocks me back in my seat. "We all slow down eventually," I say meekly.

Foley's eyebrows twitch and the corners of his mouth curl. "That's crap! I'm 55 years old. That's the new 40, right? I redid my hips so that I could run around my vineyards for

another 20 years. By then, my son will be 35 and my daughter 40. Hell, my granddaughter will be 22! Hopefully one or all will want in by then. I hope so. Being happy is the best advertising, that's for sure!"

When I ask what else makes him happy, his voice drops half an octave. "I love music." A broad smile creases his face. "I play guitar and sing [with the Robert Foley Band] as much as I can. It's all original stuff; I write down lyrics and melodies all day long, wherever I am, whatever I'm doing." (For the record, the band is actually pretty good. My personal favorites off their album *Paperboy* are "Amber Rose" and "Hands of Time.")

"When you have such musical talents, why are you making wine," I ask. He replies, "In terms of making a living, it was an easy choice. Music is a tough life when you add in the pressure of money."

Foley got his start in wine relatively early in life. "My dad was an engineer, and in 1962, when I was in the third grade, we moved to the East Bay area of San Francisco. After that, I always remember wine as Dad's serious passion. Bill Miller [of Inglenook] lived next door and, a few years later, took me to the winery. At the time, there was no wine tourism, but I loved the atmosphere."

During that visit, Foley tasted Inglenook's 1968 Charbono from cask. "It was inky but lovely—so far outside of my experience as to be something completely new. Boom! Just like that, it changed my life." He hurried off to UC Davis and took degrees in enology and viticulture. After graduation, he worked for Joe Heitz and, in 1978, was part of the group that started Markham Vineyards in Napa.

In 1992 Foley helped Jim Pride create Pride Mountain Vineyards. Then, in quick succession, he was instrumental in the founding of Paloma (1994), his own Robert Foley Vineyards (1998), Hourglass and Switchback Ridge (1999), and Engel Family Winery (2000).

Dos Lagos on Atlas Peak, sourced from a single vineyard owned by Tom and Marcy Dinkel, is one of his newest ventures. (Foley projects there will be around 100 cases of the inaugural 2007 vintage Cabernet Sauvignon.) Another is Red Hook Winery on Long Island, New York, where Foley works with Abe Schoener and Steve Mathiasen and consults with the resident winemaker. "We're applying California techniques to Long Island vineyards, which is exciting. I'm learning so much, but since they're not paying me, I guess we're even."

Foley rubs the nape of his neck. "I get asked to do a lot of projects, but I'm very careful in what I take on. I don't agree to any deals where I can't be out in the vineyards as much as I want and need to be." His wife Kelly (the subject of Paperboy's track 6, Kelly's Jacket) helps out where needed, as do Hector Lopez, Foley's vineyard manager, and the aforementioned Kelly Peterson of Switchback Ridge.

So many wineries

Switchback Ridge was a typical winery project for someone like Foley. He met John Peterson in 1993 at Cornell (now Frank Family Vineyards). They struck up a conversation in

which Foley found out that Peterson owned a vineyard and winery that was looking for some key grape purchases until some of their new plantings came into production. Foley wanted to see what Peterson's vineyard could do, and Kelly had already indicated to her father that she, someday, wanted to start a family wine label. The solution was quickly obvious to everyone involved. "Our relationship with Bob is more friendship than business," Kelly Peterson tells me. "As far as I'm concerned, he's family. He makes our wine, for which we do pay him, and we share fruit from our vineyard for his Robert Foley wines. There is no formal contract or agreement. It's just an understanding we have to help each other out as best we can."

Peterson Ranch is in the northeastern part of Napa, where the Silverado Trail intersects Dutch Henry Canyon Road. It's been in the Peterson family since the early 1900s, and its modern history started in 1990, when old prune orchards were replanted with 20 acres (8ha) of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Petite Sirah. My personal favorite of Foley's projects, Switchback Ridge, now produces about 2,500 cases per year.

As for Hourglass, in 1992 Dr Mark Kliewer, dean of viticulture at UC Davis, told proprietor Jeff Smith that his hill could be one of the premier Cabernet Sauvignon sites in Napa. He explained that the valley is shaped like an hourglass, and Smith's site defines the narrowest point in an area known for stellar Cabernet (neighbors include Grace Family, Colgin's Tychson Hill, Duckhorn, and Vineyard 29). Smith enlisted the help of family friend and fellow bandmate Foley, and annual production now hovers near 1,000 cases, with a new winery in Calistoga recently completed.

Engel Family Winery's story is quite different but also the result of a special relationship. Engel ("angel" in Yiddish) is a ten-year-old nonprofit set up by Foley's friend Ron Engel, a life-insurance professional who was also once a top-rated wrestler.

"Once I knew that all profits went to a wrestling foundation for children," Foley says, "I told Ron I'd do the winemaking for nothing. Napa may be the finest grape-growing region in the world, and I'm lucky to be able to work on a great cause with so much quality fruit."

Bob's dream job

Robert Foley Vineyards is the first crush facility and wine cave Foley has ever owned, after implementing other people's visions for decades. The label produces about 8,000

cases spread out among six varietals. His own 5-acre (2ha) Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard, in addition to comprising a separate bottling, is a big contributor to the Claret, which is Cabernet Sauvignon-based. In fact, the 2003 Claret was actually 100 percent composed of that variety.

Foley's favorite terroirs combine mountainous, well-drained soils and the exposure of high elevations. These factors concentrate a grape's aromas, flavors, color, and density. The goal is to make the most expressive wines imaginable using traditional techniques and hands-on care. He works extensively with Clones 4 and 7 because they express the density of the local volcanic soils as a plethora of black fruit, and he ruthlessly green-harvests to concentrate those flavors. The recent planting of another acre and one more yet to come will eventually double production (to 400 cases) of his ultra-cult Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon.

Foley's equipment and winery, like his habits, are functional rather than elegant. The outdoor crush pad and fermentation area is indeed quite Spartan, no-frills winemaking at its best, with little spent on non-essentials like landscaping. Or a roof. This alfresco work area is designed for easy, methodical access during the craziness of crush. The custom-built wine cave is labyrinthine, a tunnel bored deep into Howell Mountain, with tracks laid along the floor to make transporting barrels a more automated chore. It's utilitarian, to be sure, but also strangely beautiful, with dark rocks offsetting creamy barrels that march into the distance.

"Harvest is a trying time for winemakers and crews," Foley says, "as we dance ballet that's stained a sticky purple. My 30 years of experience helped me design everything around my work style. No muss and no fuss." When the time is right, Foley brings in a crew of 30 helpers for three days of high-intensity harvesting. "At 2,000ft [600m], harvest is always late. Sometimes that can cause problems. The style of viticulture I employ isn't for everyone."

The search for perfectly ripe fruit

Foley leans back in his chair. "Cabernet Sauvignon, when almost ripe, sucks." Ripeness is tripped by extensive diurnal swings—a pump that is the vine's signal to start ripening fruit. "We have to let that process unwind. We look for darkening seeds, a sign of mature physiology. Mature skins equal mature wine. The key is getting the vines to shut down before picking. The good news is that

we're usually blessed with dry conditions—it seldom rains between mid-May and November—and so we have minimal insect and fungus issues. We're not organic or biodynamic, but we practice sustainable, clean farming."

According to Foley, the 2010 vintage in Napa is uneven in quality due to cool weather and tons of rain early in the year. "The rain helped our overall drought picture but also delayed budbreak and the entire cycle. There's lots of vegetative growth that we've had to control. I'm also seeing a big crop load, so we'll be thinning substantially just before and during veraison. Harvest will be late, but we're used to that on Howell Mountain. Many years we're picking into November and even December."

When asked about other recent vintages, Foley says he particularly liked his 2009s. "There was a lot of rain late in the season, while the Cabernet Sauvignon was still out. We waited, the vines dried, and we had no problem with dilution. Cab is pretty bulletproof that way." His 2008 crop was, in his words, perfect. "I love, love, love it. Phenomenal wines from a small crop. Here, waiting was also the key. Everyone says 2007 was great, and I guess that means 2008 is worse. Really? I don't think so."

Of course, times are now much tougher, especially in reference to selling high-end Napa Cabernet. Foley acknowledges this new reality by traveling much more than he used to, hand-selling cases at wine dinners, charity events, and the like.

"Just like on the other end of the business, it's all about relationships," Foley says. "At least that hasn't changed. It's always been that way for me, whether at Markham or Pride or anywhere else. At least wine buyers seem to be moving away from ratings as the sole way to purchase wine. This makes hand-selling even more important, because individuals are making up their own minds about what they like and want."

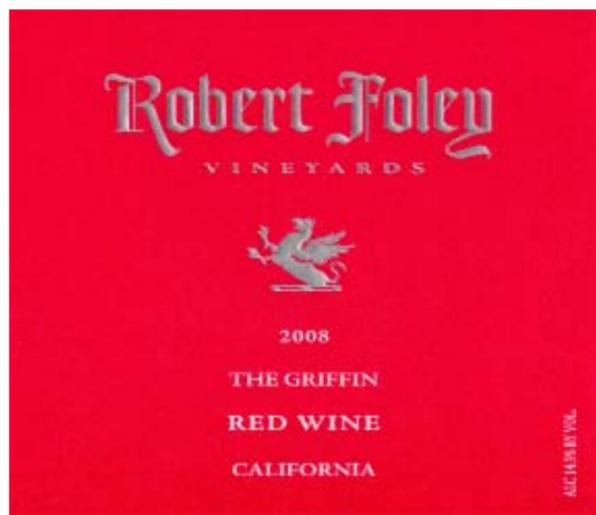
Overall, I've been impressed with the level of thought, detail, and precision planning that have gone into the execution of Foley's vision. When I mention this, he just smiles and says, "Isn't that the whole point? We always try to raise the bar. Even if the wine is great, we always try to make it better."

That philosophy is probably why Foley is involved in so many successful projects. One characteristic I've often found in the breed called winemaker is the relative strength of both brain hemispheres. Not only must a professional winemaker be able to conceive of projects old and new, he or she must also execute those schemes while on the run. It's unusual for one mind to contain all of these abilities, and in an alternate universe most winemakers would probably be sculptors, painters, or musicians.

Bob Foley has found the happiest medium, where he can craft cult wines and original music at his own pace and within his own rules. All of his partners and collaborators have given him his head, and none has regretted it. A good example is Hourglass, which has come a long way since Jeff Smith crafted his original mission

statement to "make wines that don't suck, in the event we have to drink them all ourselves."

Happily for the owners of Bob Foley's projects, but unhappily for the thousands still on waiting lists due to Foley's cult-like status among wine aficionados, that's no longer a problem. ■



CONTACT INFORMATION & PRICES FOR RECENT VINTAGES

- Robert Foley Vineyards Pinot Blanc
- Robert Foley Vineyards Charbono
- Robert Foley Vineyards Petite Sirah Musclemann
- Robert Foley Vineyards Petite Sirah Pepperland
- Robert Foley Vineyards Merlot
- Robert Foley Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain
- Robert Foley Vineyards Claret

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PO Box 847, Angwin, CA 94508
+1 707 965 2669
www.robertfoleyvineyards.com

- Switchback Ridge Petite Sirah
- Switchback Ridge Merlot
- Switchback Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon

Switchback Ridge
PO Box 856, Calistoga, CA 94515
+1 707 967 8987
www.switchbackridge.com

- Hourglass Cabernet Sauvignon

Hourglass
1104 Adams St, Suite 103, St Helena, CA 94574
+1 707 968 9332
www.hourglasswines.com

- Engel Family Winery Merlot Rock Mountain
- Engel Family Winery Merlot Spring Mountain

Engel Family Winery
3397 St Helena Hwy N, St Helena, CA 94574
+1 707 967 5500

- Dos Lagos Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Atlas Peak

Dos Lagos Vineyards
Atlas Peak Rd, Napa, CA 94558
+1 707 278 4080
www.doslagosvineyards.com

- Red Hook Winery Rosé
- Red Hook Winery Chardonnay
- Red Hook Winery Sauvignon Blanc
- Red Hook Winery The Electric

Red Hook Winery
Van Brunt St & Beard St, New York, NY 11231
+1 718 855 8707

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\$76-150/€51-100/€51-100 // more than \$150/€100/€100