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## The Araujo legacy: Wheeler Farms and Accendo Cellars, plus 10 wines tasted

After the sale of Calistoga-based Araujo Estate (now Eisele Vineyard) to France's Pinault Family, Bart and Daphne Araujo established Accendo Cellars. Simultaneously, they organized a collective and introduced Wheeler Farms in St. Helena, a modern hospitality and custom-crush facility for Napa's top fine wines. Now, they are passing the torch to the second generation.



Jonathan Cristaldi  
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Daphne and Bart Araujo. Credit: Accendo Cellars

Though only a decade has passed since Bart and Daphne Araujo's prized Eisele Vineyard was sold to Artemis Domaines and the Pinault family (owners of Bordeaux's Château Latour), they've come so far that it seems half a century ago.

### A legacy in transition

In 2013, after selling Eisele, they reinvented themselves with the introduction of Accendo Cellars – a label helmed by many of the same friends and family who helped establish Araujo Estate, including second-generation partners Jaime and Greg Araujo, as

well as Françoise Peschon, who was the on-site winemaker at Araujo Estate beginning in 1993, and Nigel Kinsman, who joined Araujo Estate in 2007.

Decanter revealed today (4th October) that **Bart and Daphne are stepping back from the Accendo day-to-day operations** and passing the torch to second-generation partners Jaime and Greg Araujo. For half a year, Bart Araujo will serve in an advisory role as Executive Chairman to ensure a smooth transition.

Peschon continues to produce Accendo's Sauvignon Blanc, while Kinsman makes the red wines. Consultant winemaker Michel Rolland continues participating in blending sessions. Viticulturist Steve Matthiasson and biodynamic specialists Marla Bird and Marley Dawson make up the rest of the winemaking team. The wines are produced at Wheeler Farms with the assistance of cellar master Cesar Sandoval.



Bart and Daphne Araujo's first harvest in 1991. Credit: Araujo Family

## The vision for Wheeler Farms

The Araujos have always sourced grapes from vineyards they consider to be 'grand cru' level sites in Napa. Today, those include such sites as Vine Hill Ranch in Oakville, Ecotone on Howell Mountain, and Terravina in the hills above Rutherford.

In 2014, even as they began building Accendo Cellars, the Araujos set in motion the plans to produce and house their prized fruit at what has become Wheeler Farms – a full-service, custom crush winery operation in St. Helena, California.

It was once part of the 809-hectare (2,000-acre) Rancho Carne Humana Spanish land grant with viticultural roots dating back to 1871 and one Charles H. Wheeler, a founding member of the historic St. Helena Viticultural Club.

Wheeler's son, J. H. Wheeler, expanded his family's operations in the 1890s and their land assets. The parcel of land purchased for present-day Wheeler Farms at 588 Zinfandel Lane was once part of the original Wheeler family farm, which included plantings of grapes as well as prunes, pears, and walnut trees.

As Bart Araujo describes Wheeler Farms, he says flatly; 'It's the Rolls Royce of custom crush.' He's not off the mark. The facility has attracted top talent, including 100-point winemakers like Jeff Ames of Tor Kenward and Kinsman himself, who also produces the J.H. Wheeler label wines (named for the Wheeler family).

The 4.65-hectare site surrounding the Wheeler Farms hospitality suite and winery is farmed by Silverado Farming Company. It includes plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc, rooted alongside a grove of olive trees, a fruit orchard, vegetable gardens, chickens and beehives. The winery's open and airy Hospitality House boasts a professional kitchen helmed by a talented staff that sources local ingredients to plate Michelin-worthy cuisine to pair with, and highlight, the wines.

## How community support paved the way for success

In 1990, Bart and Daphne arrived in Napa, purchased the Eisele Vineyard in Calistoga, and launched Araujo Estate wines. The Araujos enlisted a dream team in winemaker Tony Soter and viticulturist David Abreu. Still, it isn't widely known that in the same vintage, all the grapes harvested were sold to Joseph Phelps.

In 1991, Araujo Estate made its first wine, splitting the harvest with Phelps. 'That's the only vintage in which two Eisele Vineyard designate wines [one made by Craig



Front: Daphne and Bart Araujo Back: Jaime Araujo, Greg Araujo, Steve Matthiason, Michel Rolland, Françoise Peschon Credit: Accendo Cellars



Williams, one by Tony Soter] exist in the world,' Bart Araujo confirmed. Around this time, Joe Phelps offered the Araujos Phelps-bottled Eisele Vineyard wines from his personal collection going back to 1975. Phelps felt it would inform the Araujos on their journey.

That seemed to be the generous philosophy of Milt and Barbara Eisele as well – both approaching their 80s when Bart and Daphne, in their 40s, arrived in Napa, but ready to offer advice. Though perhaps the most helpful guidance came from Belle and Barney Rhodes, whom Bart Araujo calls the true 'founders of Napa' from the standpoint of hospitality and entertainment. The Rhodes became sort of surrogate parents to the Araujos and people like iconic chef Gary Danko and vintner Tor Kenward.

The Rhodes furnished advice, gossip, and connections – but above all, they inspired a deep respect for the land and for those who came before them. The hospitality-driven Napa Valley we know today may have been built relationship by relationship, idea by idea, during dinner parties at the Rhodes' home – their former residence is now Bella Oaks, owned by Suzanne Deal Booth.

But even the kindness of new neighbours didn't completely extinguish a competitor mentality that would earn Bart Araujo a lecture he never forgot.

At a luncheon with Robert Mondavi, the Napa legend warmly welcomed Bart and Daphne by announcing; 'I'm so happy you are here in the valley.' Taken aback and perplexed, Bart chided the elder statesman: 'Excuse me, Mr. Mondavi, but we're competitors.' Watching Mondavi's smile fade and high-toned voice turn firm, Mondavi offered that this kind of thinking was 'not the Napa Valley way.' Bart got the message. 'A rising tide raises all boats.' From then on, the Araujos and their new Napa community would rise together and rise tall.



Daphne Araujo working the 1995 harvest. Credit: Araujo family

## Passing the torch

As they grapple with this new transition, daughter Jaime and son Greg see some of the mentorship their parents received when they arrived coming from Bart and Daphne. Jaime describes the similarity as a 'generational responsibility', and the role the Araujos have unwittingly assumed.

Proud of the role that her family has played in the growth of Napa Valley, Jaime draws a direct link from 'all the work our parents did' to the Napa of today. 'I don't think anyone in the wine world would deny that Napa deserves its place on the world stage,' she muses.

For his part, Greg understands that feeling of uncertainty. He had always imagined he would join the family business, but he was unsure of his place or passion for it. He detoured into a world of Michelin-starred restaurants, which proved instrumental in helping inspire a passion for wine and hospitality at a high level.

It helped contextualise the 'advice' he'd get from Bob Mondavi at parties in the Mondavi caves. As a young man, Greg remembered the Napa legend 'would make a bee-line and corner me and tell me I have big shoes to fill.'

Jaime and Greg Araujo have journeyed across the world and returned to Napa to help build upon their family's legacy. It is the beginning of a familial succession story. Jaime, who is armed with a Master's Degree in Medieval Studies, has, like her brother

Greg, who worked in the oil industry, found a true calling working alongside her family and contributing to the continued success of her parents' work in Napa Valley.

'We don't want to tell them what to do,' Bart assures me. 'We just make suggestions. The Rhodes, Eiseles and Mondavis all gave us our training wheels and gave us a push, but we had to ride. That's what we want for them.'

From their home at Wheeler Farms, bit by bit, the Araujos have been disseminating the advice they received from their Napa mentors and, in every way they can, are paying it forward to the next generation of Napa principals.

## Top grape sources for Wheeler Farms and Accendo Cellars:

As one of Napa's earliest adopters of organic and biodynamic farming, the Araujos are diligent about farming and improving grape sources.

The western bench of the Mayacamas is the focus for both Accendo and J. H. Wheeler.

### **Sleeping Lady Vineyard, Yountville AVA**

**Farmed by:** Bettinelli Vineyard Management

**The first year Araujos bought grapes:** 2014

**Interesting facts:** Giancarlo Bettinelli farms vines to the Araujos specifications. They get Clone 7 Cabernet from Block 4 and Clone 22, a favourite of the late Denis Malbec (Notre Vin and Aliénor) for its aromatics. Block 3 has clones 4, 7, and Old Vines.

### **Vine Hill Ranch, Oakville AVA**

**Farmed by:** Phillips Family Farming & Michael Wolf Vineyard Service

**The first year Araujos bought grapes:** 2008 (For their previous Altagracia bottling)

**Interesting facts:** The site is adjacent to Martha's Vineyard, the famous source for Heitz Cellars. Bart Araujo said that when Michel Rolland was running a blending session for Eisele, he paused on the Vine Hill component and asked, 'What is this? It's very good,' which for the typically tight-lipped Rolland was high praise. Bart took note.

### **Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper, Oakville AVA**

**Farmed by:** Beckstoffer Vineyards

**The first year Araujos bought grapes:** 2017

**Interesting facts:** Charlie Hopper bought 258.9ha (640 acres) from George Yount and gifted 40 of them (100 acres) to his daughter, Missouri. For J.H. Wheeler, they're getting Block 3B and Block 4, and they have 1.6ha (four acres) in Block 5, which was planted in 2017.

### **M-Bar Ranch, Oakville AVA**

**Farmed by:** Michael Wolf Vineyard Service

**The first year Araujos bought grapes:** 2014

**Interesting facts:** Missouri Hopper, the daughter of Charlie Hopper, was born in the house that overlooks the property called M-Bar Ranch. Liz Moffit's family bought it in 1961 from Walter Sullivan, who engineered the sale of Beaulieu Vineyards to Heublein in the same decade. For 50 years, they sold grapes to the Mondavi family. The Araujos affectionately call the site Moffit.

# 10 wines from Wheeler Farms and Accendo Cellars

The wines are listed by colour and score by winery



Accendo Cellars, Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, California, USA 2016

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A blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, and Sauvignon Blanc Musqué. Fragrant white flowers, apricot and almond skin. A lovely candied minerality leads to gorgeous bright, just-ripe orchard fruits, a touch o...

Points 95



Accendo Cellars, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California, USA 2018

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

A truly generous wine that balances red, black, and blue-toned fruits, interlaced with savoury baking spices and tobacco and possessing an earthy intensity. The fruit concentration is quite compact, and the win...

Points 97



Accendo Cellars, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California, USA 2016

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Pure red berry fruit leads from the glass intermixed with heady cedar spices. Full-bodied, revealing a fantastic mid-palate depth of concentration with a spectacular vein of crushed stone minerality. Th...

Points 98



JH Wheeler, Sauvignon Blanc, St Helena, Napa Valley, California, USA 2021

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

In 2021, the J.H. Wheeler Sauvignon Blanc was crafted entirely from estate grapes grown on the site around Wheeler Farms on Zinfandel Lane. Bordeaux Clone 1 provides a zesty, crisp, mineral-kissed, floral...

Points 95



JH Wheeler, Vine Hill Ranch Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Tasted almost a year later with Nigel Kinsman at Wheeler Farms in St. Helena, California, this wine is only gaining in beauty. A masterful, elegant, and seamless Napa Cabernet from Block 3B at Vine Hill Ranch...

Points 99



JH Wheeler, Beckstoffer George III Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley, California, USA 2018

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Nigel Kinsman, the winemaker for the J. H. Wheeler wines, professes a love-hate relationship with the Beckstoffer Georges III vineyard because it's a large vineyard, encompassing some 100 plantable...

Points 97



JH Wheeler, Beckstoffer George III Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Rutherford, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

In the J. H. Wheeler label portfolio, this is a wine that, vintage after vintage, reveals an elegant, savoury, mineral-driven style of Cabernet sourced from the famous Beckstoffer George III vineyard in the...

Points 96



JH Wheeler, Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley, California, USA 2019

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

A dynamic, electric, lacy Cabernet from the outstanding 2019 vintage in Napa. Leads with pure black fruit aromas tinged with cedarwood and dark chocolate notes. Full-bodied with layers of blackberry and...

Points 96



JH Wheeler, Beckstoffer Missouri Hopper Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Oakville, Napa Valley, California, USA 2017

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Winemaker Nigel Kinsman made the best of a year riddled with heat spikes. Full and rich with softness from slightly less acidity because of the warm growing season, but utterly joyful, with a silky-satiny richne...

Points 95