

# LE PAN

LIFE LIVED WELL | MAY - JUNE 2016

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# *Community* SPIRIT

Napa Valley is home to some of the most coveted wines and vineyards in the world. Yet away from the commerce, a charitable endeavour has, over 35 years, raised millions for worthy causes. Two winemakers behind this year's extravaganza, Naoko Dalla Valle and Agustin F. Huneus, share their enthusiasm for Auction Napa Valley with LE PAN.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID EUSTACE







This page: Naoko Dalla Valle and the Dalla Valle Vineyards in Oakville. Opposite page: Agustin F. Huneeus of Quintessa







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n 1981, the late Napa Valley winemaker Robert Mondavi and his wife Margrit imagined a small, local event that would raise funds for charity while forging community friendships. Since then, Auction Napa Valley has emerged as one of the most prominent wine auctions in the world, having raised more than US\$150 million to date.

Over a long weekend in June, interspersed with winery dinners, tastings and parties, a series of up to 200 spectacular lots goes under the hammer. The event attracts a well-heeled crowd, including celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Jay Leno. In addition to the one-of-a-kind blends and rare vintages not available to the public, there are exclusive experiences such as meals with winemakers, excursions into off-the-beaten-path areas of Napa Valley, and overnight stays at the homes of vineyard owners, all donated by the wineries. Then there are the super lots: non-wine prizes such as tickets to the Superbowl or a visit to the Bulgari workshop in Rome to design a bespoke jewellery piece.

Held at Meadowood, the Relais & Châteaux resort owned by Bill Harlan of Harlan Estate, the auction underwrites medical and educational initiatives including health insurance for every child living in Napa Valley and free healthcare for farmworkers. In 2014, US\$10 million was designated for victims of that year's Napa earthquake.

This year, Auction Napa Valley will be chaired by Agustin F. Huneus, managing partner and co-owner of Quintessa, which his father, the Chilean viticulturist Agustin Huneus, founded in 1990. The estate made its name focusing on Bordeaux varietals – an approach also adopted by Naoko Dalla Valle, owner of Dalla Valle Vineyards. She and her late husband, Gustav, moved to Napa in the early 1980s, founding the estate almost by accident. Today, it is one of the region's most vaunted.

Here, Huneus and Dalla Valle talk about the buzz, glamour and community spirit of the auction, Napa culture, their families, and how a small valley emerged as America's premier wine region.

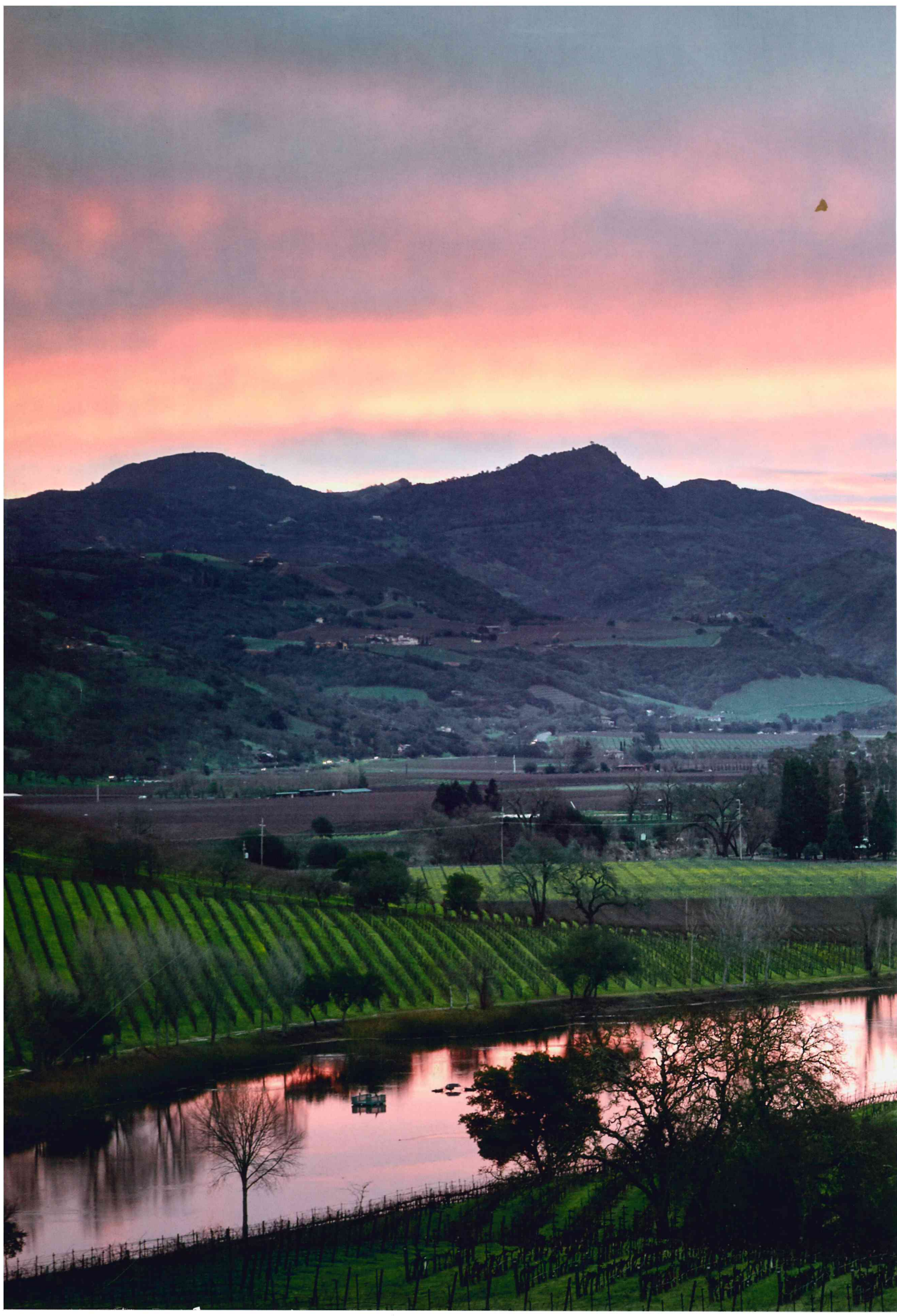




This page and following spread: Views of Quintessa in Rutherford. Opposite page: Dalla Valle and Huneus at the Quintessa estate







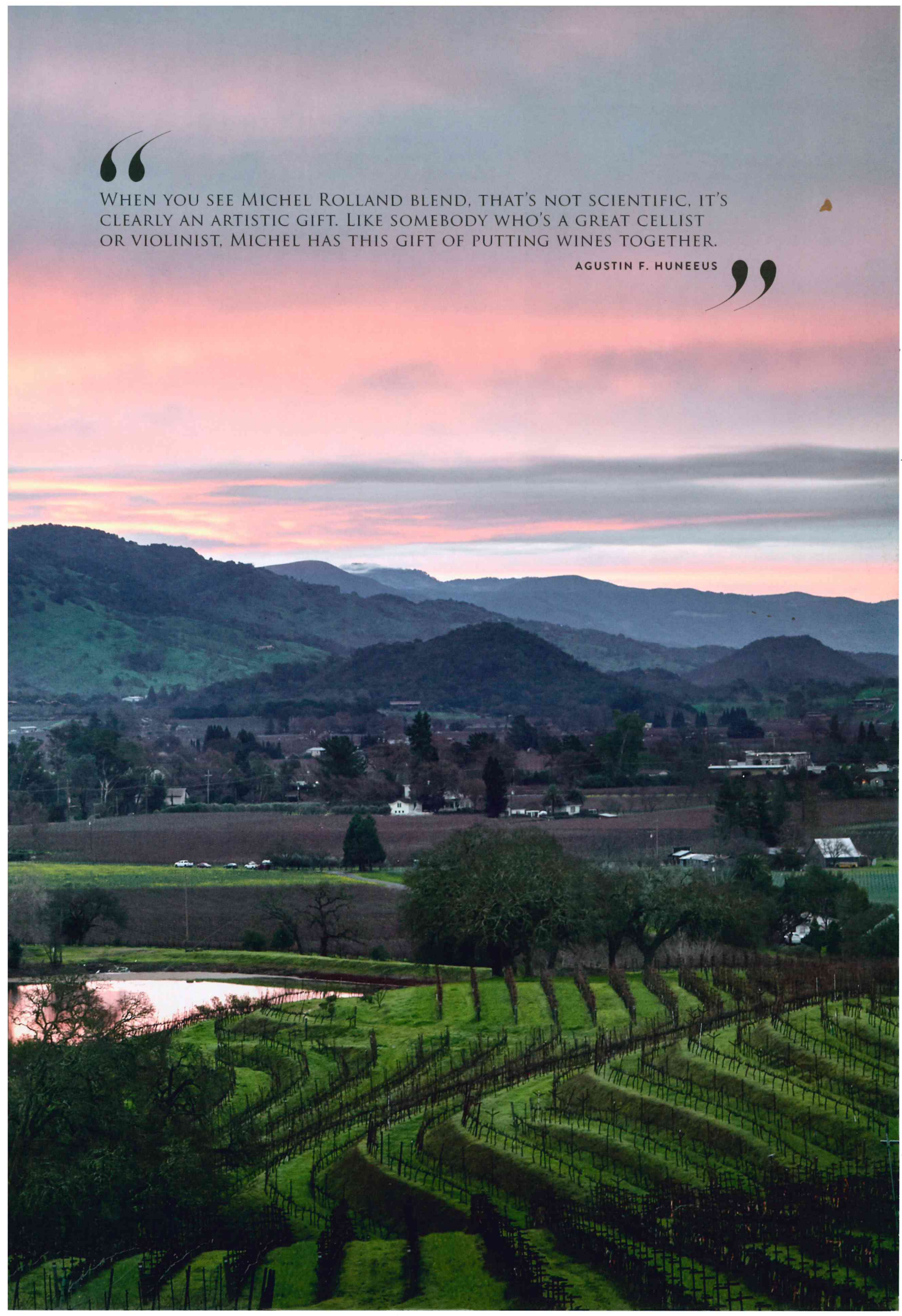


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WHEN YOU SEE MICHEL ROLLAND BLEND, THAT'S NOT SCIENTIFIC, IT'S CLEARLY AN ARTISTIC GIFT. LIKE SOMEBODY WHO'S A GREAT CELLIST OR VIOLINIST, MICHEL HAS THIS GIFT OF PUTTING WINES TOGETHER.

AGUSTIN F. HUNEEUS

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#### On Auction Napa Valley

**NAOKO DALLA VALLE:** My husband Gustav and I first started coming to the auction as bidders, as guests, but it was much smaller in those days and the lots didn't fetch the amazing prices they do today. Then [after founding Dalla Valle], we started participating, and donating an auction lot each year. I remember it all very fondly – the community was so friendly.

**AGUSTIN F. HUNEEUS:** I remember watching the auction as a kid, seeing it through my parents' eyes as they were getting ready for it, seeing what a big deal it was for them, and how the whole community came together. As a teenager, my focus was on trying to get all the leftovers – the leftover food, the leftover wine. I remember sneaking into Meadowood, to right where the party had been.

When I was younger and going to the first auctions, many of the lots were bought by our own community – our restaurant friends, our distributor friends. That has certainly changed, mainly because of the price of the lots. What hasn't changed is that all the vintners [winemakers] and the whole community get together to put this auction together.

**NDV:** I think it was in 1995 when our own Dalla Valle lot fetched over US\$100,000 for the first time. I remember that there was a lot of shrieking and hollering. The activities just escalated, but in a wonderful way, because of the philanthropy of the guests. In Napa Valley, people can be very generous. Then there was the six-litre single bottle of 1992 Screaming Eagle, which went for US\$500,000 in 2000. That was amazing.

**AFH:** We see the impact the auction has on a daily level with things like Olé Health [which provides

free year-round medical services to farmworkers]. A lot of farmworkers were also impacted by the earthquake two years ago. Napa Valley Vintners dedicated part of its auction fund to help victims. It's tremendous generosity – not just from the bidders who come and buy the lots, but all the local people who volunteer, and all the wineries that give dinners, events, bottles and barrels of wine.

**NDV:** I've tried to get involved in similar charitable activities in other countries. In Hong Kong there's a little bit, but in Europe this kind of event just does not exist. In Japan, they're trying to start, but it's nothing like here. The beautiful spirit of charity we have in this country is fascinating and very special.

**AFH:** The culture, the notion of giving huge amounts of money to charity, just doesn't exist in other countries the way it does here. It is absolutely one of the great underpinnings of American culture: this generosity, this desire to help when something serious happens. At Quintessa, we held a charity auction for Chilean earthquake victims, and though it had nothing to do with Napa or the Napa wine auction, all the Napa vintners came.

**NDV:** I had the same thing happen with the Japanese tsunami in 2011. Your father told me exactly what to do, and the other vintners chipped in. That doesn't happen so easily in other countries, but here it was easy.

**AFH:** This year, we have some really exciting lots, plus an after-party that will be wild. Robert Parker is going to host a dinner at Quintessa, and bring his favourite Napa and Bordeaux wines from his cellar.

**NDV:** And Piero Antinori, a good friend of your family and mine, is generously donating a wonderful lot relating both to Antica, his property









here in the valley, and to his beautiful properties in Italy. It's going to be fabulous.

**AFH:** The Staglins [of Staglin Family Vineyard] are personally hosting a safari to South Africa, with side visits to see some great wineries.

**NDV:** Yes, and for Dalla Valle, for the first time we are able to produce a wine we call MDV – it's 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon from our Maya vineyard [named after Naoko's daughter Maya]. The winning bidder will receive the first MDV in a six-litre, etched and hand-painted bottle, and have dinner with our family. And then of course, Mondavi. It's the winery's 50th anniversary, and it is hosting a dinner for 50 people, friends and family. What a wonderful, wonderful lot. We really are excited. We are going to make lots of money for charity.

### On Napa Valley and how it has changed

**AFH:** I remember when there was just one restaurant in Napa – Mustards [Grill]. If you wanted to have dinner or lunch, it was at Mustards. You would see Clarke Swanson at one table, my dad at another, and Robert Mondavi at another. You actually knew everybody at every table. That's the way Napa was.

When my parents bought Quintessa in 1990, Napa Valley Cabernet was hard to sell. Back then, people were drinking more white. Chardonnay was the best-seller, Sauvignon Blanc was the hot variety, and nobody was looking for Napa Cab. An acre of land in Napa was US\$20,000 planted. Today, an average acre would probably be around US\$300,000 – 15 times what it was back then. Of course, really good land like yours, Naoko, would be much, much more. When my parents bought this property, it was a huge gamble for our family.

What has happened is that through the work of the great vintners, we have set the bar a little higher for world-class appellations. It has required focus and dedicated, trailblazing vintners like Mondavi. My father always says that if Mondavi had been born in Santa Rosa [in Sonoma] instead of Napa, we would be in a very different place.

**NDV:** In the past three decades, Napa Valley has stepped up three levels in terms of sophistication. I think we vintners have all strived to do better. We have become better known. We have proven that this is without doubt one of the best wine-growing regions in the world.

### On why Napa Valley attracts entrepreneurs

**AFH:** In the early days, the people here were farmers, and they wanted to make Napa great. As they succeeded, Napa Valley drew other entrepreneurs eager to be part of the lifestyle, which included not just growing great wine but also sharing great food. It included art, and it included charity. Part of it,

too, was the camaraderie that exists between the vintners. The common passion to make Napa world class really brought people together.

I think that one of the things Napa Valley has always done well, and that helped it get to where it is in the world, is that we made wines that were a bit softer, a bit rounder, a bit riper. If you think about Bordeaux, their style has changed. Just as Napa emulated Bordeaux for many years, now Bordeaux compares itself to Napa Valley.

**NDV:** It used to be that we would send our children and winemakers to Europe. But now, Europeans want to come to us. Yes, we were chasing Bordeaux for a while. Maybe they are chasing us a little bit, now.

### On family wine businesses

**NDV:** In my case, my daughter is not yet in the business. She's still learning; she's preparing. But you know, it's really wonderful to know she's interested in eventually taking over from me.

**AFH:** I feel that it was a privilege to work with my father at Quintessa for the past 30 years. But the truth is that it's hard sometimes, and as in all family relationships, you have to draw boundaries, you have to be patient, you have to know when to back off. It's a wonderful privilege, but it's not easy.

**NDV:** There are challenges.

**AFH:** I read in *The New York Times* that only three percent of family businesses in the United States make it to a third generation.

**NDV:** Yet here in Napa Valley, 95 percent of the wineries are family owned.

### On the art and craft of winemaking

**NDV:** Wine is both art and craft. Then, of course, we have to add our time and wisdom.

**AFH:** There are certainly parts of winemaking that are very much like art. Take the blending. When you see [consulting winemaker] Michel Rolland blend, that's not scientific – it's clearly an artistic gift. Like somebody who's a great cellist or violinist, Michel has this gift for putting wines together.

**NDV:** Passion is part of it, too.

**AFH:** We're always adapting what we're doing. The way we make wine, the way we farm is evolving all the time. We're always learning things, but it's funny because the more we learn, the more we go back to the things that we were doing 20, 30 years ago. In many ways, we've renounced technological advancements and gone back to simpler processes, simpler winemaking. It's a bit of a conundrum, isn't it? We go back to go forward.

MODERATED BY KAREN MACNEIL

“IT USED TO BE THAT WE WOULD SEND OUR CHILDREN AND WINEMAKERS TO EUROPE. BUT NOW, EUROPEANS WANT TO COME TO US.

NAOKO DALLA VALLE



