



PHOTOGRAPH BY PRISCILLA UPTON

## Jim Barbour

Barbour Vineyards  
104 Camino Dorado, Napa  
500 case production

In 1989, by Jim Barbour's count, there were twelve vineyard management companies in Napa Valley, and now there are over fifty. Jim says the work may be perceived as easy, but it's anything but. The morning of this interview, Jim had been up since 1:30 am because the temperature had gotten down to 31° and 30° in Chiles Valley and out at La Herradura, and Barbour had got "everything going" in the way of frost protection. Water gives the best frost production, then wind machines. Only problem with water, Jim says, is that those little hoses for micro-emitters and misters can freeze.

When Jim was 10 years old in 1962, his dad, stepmother, and, as Jim puts it, seven under-foot: three sisters (two up and one down from him in age) and five steps (two already out of the house, at college) moved to Rutherford from San Francisco. His dad had married a woman originally from Napa, and they bought Rancho de Los Ojos Azules, where Sequoia Grove is today, for their combined families when Napa Valley had more acres in walnuts and prunes than vines. Mr. Barbour continued to commute to work for ten years as the kids went to the local schools and worked on the ranch with its five acres in prunes, five in apples and twenty in vineyard.

Every weekend his dad worked with Jim and his stepbrothers in the vineyard and orchards, and after five years everyone had learned something about ranching. At harvest, all the orchard and vineyard fruit was picked into lug boxes; prunes went to the dehydrator in St. Helena, now offices for Icon Estates, and apples to a dehydrator where Angèle Restaurant in Napa is today, to be cleaned and shipped down the Napa River to market. Jim says all the grapes from the ranch's head-pruned vines of Gamay, Mondeuse and Petit Bouschet went into Gallo's jug program at the Napa Valley Cooperative Winery.

Jim started college at Chico State intending to be a cop, but the program was not at all what he wanted, nor were there any jobs. He had been taking ag classes as well, and driving tractor for Laurie Wood at Frank Wood & Sons in the summer, so after two years Jim switched to UC Davis and what was familiar: plants, wine, viticulture. John Arns and Marc Mondavi were also at Davis, but on the wine-making side. Jim didn't see them (although he and Marc are now the best of friends). Jim continued to work for Laurie in the summer and after college, full-time. Ron Wicker was already with the company and Mike Shuey, a friend of Ron's from Capay Valley in Yolo County, was hired a little later. Mike had been managing 700 acres of family almonds. Together, the three helped Laurie farm 1,200 acres. Frank Wood & Sons specialized in hillside vineyard, developing and managing vineyards such as Barnett, Cain, Pride (formerly





PHOTOGRAPH: DIANA STOCKTON

Gamble Ranch), and York Creek. "A bunch of 'em up on Spring Mountain, and all pretty much red," is how Jim characterizes them, and viticulturally, like Laurie, Jim prefers "red."

When Laurie thought he might retire, Mike went to work at Sterling before joining Louis M. Martini and Ron started his own vineyard management business. About this same time, Jim's dad sold the Rutherford property to Jim Allen, who founded Sequoia Grove there in 1978. Despite the rumors of Laurie's imminent retirement, Jim stuck around for another few years, figuring out what to do next. He says he didn't want to start his own business. Finally he called Bob Steinhauer, then vineyard manager for Beringer Brothers and a mentor, and Bob said, 'You know we're just thinking of someone for San Joaquin [County],' where Beringer had 4,000 acres in the Santa Maria-Paso Robles area. Jim and Bob flew down to Meridian Vineyards in Paso

Robles and to look things over. Jim says he is a perfectionist, that that's his model, and Bob, observing him as they drove around, said, 'Maybe I don't want you down here getting everyone upset.' Next thing he knew, Jim had started his own vineyard management company in 1990. Jim thinks the vineyard management companies of Abreu, Barbour, Piña, and Wood have planted about sixty percent of Napa Valley's vineyards.

Jim started his company in a trailer on land he owned on Tokay Lane behind what is now Dean and DeLuca in St. Helena and Laurie gave him his first clients, Peter and Linda Snowden in Spring Valley. Jim had helped plant their cousins' Snowden Vineyards. Additional clients came slowly; some were people Jim had met hauling grapes for Laurie. He took clients from Napa down to Woodside-Atherton and over to Sonoma. Eventually, he began to farm quite a bit in Napa Valley. Alec Vyborny asked him to take over twenty acres at Mont LaSalle and Jim worked out a lease arrangement with the Perrys next door to Grace Family Vineyard, which he had helped plant in 1976 and redevelop in 1989. Jim says it takes ten years to know whom to choose as clients. Today, Barbour Vineyards Management has 500 acres under contract and oversees an additional 465 acres for another winery. Jim says ninety-nine percent of his clients grow Cabernet. Barbour personnel have fluctuated from a high of 125 at harvest to sixty in the winter. Nate George has been with Barbour Vineyards twelve years and Jesus

Rios, one of Jim's first hires, nineteen. They are partners in the business. A year ago, after having an office on Vintage Lane in St. Helena (with storage in Flynnville) for twenty years, Barbour Vineyards moved in to its own building at its present location.

Although crop production, or tons per acre, has remained about the same since the 1960's, there are now four or five times as many vines per acre. The five or six tons an acre then is now a maximum of four tons, from vines that were spaced 8' x 12' or 5' x 10' then, to ones 3' x 5' or 4' x 6' now, an increase from 454 vines per acre on 8' x 12' spacing to as many as 1,800 to 2,300 vines per acre. Today, water is the first priority in contemplating a vineyard site because a well must provide, at a minimum, water pumped at 33 gallons a minute for an acre of ground with new vines spaced 4' by 6'. Laurie still witches all Jim's wells. Barbour Vineyards plants cover crops like bell beans and vetch on the valley floor to reduce vigor. On the hillside to amend and hold the soil it plants fescue, bromes and clovers, but not as much dwarf rye as it used to. Cover crops keep costs down as less disking or rock picking is needed, and the plants put nitrogen back in the soil. The number of passes in the vineyard has increased, Jim says, meaning the number of times a crew goes through a vineyard block. Barbour does green fruit thinning on short shoots and another thinning at veraison. Jim says he just tells his clients to leave town when it's time to drop fruit. Barbour has stopped pulling off leaves

because of the risk of sunburn, especially with a longer hang-time or a week of 105°, even 110° weather, such as last year (but leaves were pulled just before a predicted rain fell). A weather station in each of its vineyards monitors highs and lows and current temperatures, humidity, precipitation, and wind on-line. In the high growing season, however, Barbour Vineyards relies more on pressure bombs and neutron probes than its weather stations. Jim says farming practices have gotten much more refined, but then wine wasn't \$100 a bottle back then, in 1980 or 1981, except, he reflects, Caymus Vineyards and Grace Family Vineyards, when Randy Dunn was winemaker at Caymus, where Grace was made.

Preparation begins in the fall with clearing the soil. Vine rows and irrigation/frost protection lines are marked out in the spring. When Jim worked with Laurie, Frank Wood & Sons

used to have July and August off. Now with green-growing bench-grafted vines ready to plant in growing tubes well after frost, planting time for hillside vineyard is from the middle of June through August. Even in established vineyard there is always planting to be done—a block is pulled, a new piece planted. Since becoming a client, Hundred Acre, for instance, has gone from nine to fifty acres. Jim says Barbour Vineyards' management practices are dictated by its clients' winemakers and it pretty much works with the "Red Wine League" of Heidi Barrett, Thomas Brown, Philippe Melka, Celia Welch, and newer, upcoming winemakers like Jeff Ames, Russell Bevan, Andy Erickson, and Mike Hirby. The winemaker gets involved in vineyard management *after* planning, however, about three years out. So, based on soil tests, Jim and his team choose rootstock, row orientation and budwood for new vineyard, and trellis accordingly.

Heidi Barrett was the one who talked Jim into planting his own vineyard. He hadn't wanted to, since he spent all day with vines, and had since his childhood. But Heidi persisted, so Jim planted one acre, when he started his company, then one more, and then three more. Because of its uniform soil, his vineyard is picked as one unit just once. Jim thinks the Cabernet budwood is ENTAV 337 that Caldwell first brought in, but it may be something else because it is virus free, so it might be I5. Heidi says Jim's Cabernet was one of her easiest blends that took only two or three

tries to get unlike the 25 or 30 tries other wines may demand. The first release was the 1995 of just 50 cases; now it is 500 cases, but Jim doesn't plan on making more because he doesn't want to be on the road selling wine! Celia Welch is his new winemaker; 2010 is her first vintage for Barbour. When they lived in Rutherford, Jim's dad made ten or twelve barrels of red wine every year with the Bartoluccis and other Italian growers. They'd get together to make wine with fruit from all their vineyards. Jim says there was "red on the table every night," but he didn't care for wine much until college. Then, in the 1970's and 1980's, he got to liking Grigich Hills Chardonnay. Now Jim drinks pretty much only red: Zinfandel for spice, Cabernet from his clients, which he likes with steak, lamb, birds, or really anything.

Jim says the best duck hunting in California is up by Chico where he likes to hunt with his friends and business partners at Llano Seco Duck Club. Except for a bear from British Columbia that looms in his new office, Jim hasn't shot anything he hasn't eaten. He isn't planning to spend more time hunting or making wine, however, because he still loves getting a new piece of ground to work on. These are five or ten acres now, and the soils change so much in Napa Valley that laying out even neighboring vineyards can be a fresh challenge. And new areas are opening up—Atlas Peak, Soda Canyon. Jim thinks he will always be doing something in the field of vineyard management. ■



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