

The 30-year collaboration of the Araujos and Françoise Peschon



Their enduring Napa partnership has resulted in exemplary wines of structure, elegance and transparency. Winemaker Nigel Kinsman is pictured above (credit: Jimmy Hayes) with Françoise Peschon.

Elaine Chukan Brown

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This year's harvest marks 30 years since admired winemaker Françoise Peschon started making wine with Bart and Daphne Araujo. What makes that remarkable is not only that they've worked together now for three decades (which is already uncommon), but that it's been through multiple wineries.

The Araujos are icons of Napa Valley wine. Their eponymous estate, established at the Eisele vine-

yard just east of the town of Calistoga, came to fame in the 1990s at the same time as many other cult wineries emerged from the valley. But what set Araujo Cabernet apart was not the hedonism and size associated with so many other wines of that era. It was instead the sense that their wine had transparency, elegance and finesse. Araujo Cabernet felt like European wine with all its structure and freshness but offering California flavour.

The Eisele vineyard generated much of the Araujo style. Grown on an alluvial fan of volcanic cobbles pulled out of the Palisades by Simmons Creek, Eisele is one of the few vineyards on the eastern side of the valley to boast such ground. It's the same kind of soil structure André Tchelistcheff said was the finest for Cabernet in the region, and most closely resembles the high-draining gravelly loam found in the Mayacamas bench along Napa's western slopes. It's a landscape that eschews the excess, brawn and extraction so readily found elsewhere in the valley.

But Araujo elegance also came from Peschon. Her entry into winemaking was at none other than the celebrated Ch Haut-Brion in Bordeaux. She spent a year there through 1986 after graduating from UC Davis, before then working alongside Warren Winiarski for six years at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars.

This combination of experiences offered first-hand insight into not only classic wine, but wine with a focus on structure and transparency. While Winiarski and Haut-Brion certainly relied on oak for ageing, neither allowed it to cover a wine's sense of place.

In the early 1990s, Peschon became assistant to Tony Soter and Mia Klein. The duo helped elevate Napa Valley Cabernet, capturing the restraint and freshness of its classic producers while seeking the stability and refinement possible in a modern age. At the time they served as consultants for Araujo. Then, in 1993, when Araujo needed a dedicated winemaker, they hired Peschon.

Peschon remained an integral part of the Araujo team until they sold their estate in 2012 to François Pinault's Artémis Group, owner of first growth Ch Latour. In 2013, when Bart and Daphne launched their new project Accendo, one of the first people they called was Peschon.

Araujo culture, building Accendo

In starting Accendo, Bart and Daphne decided to launch a multi-generational family winery. They partnered with Bart's daughter Jaime (who also owns her own wine brand Trois Noix) and son Greg to start the new venture.

In addition to Peschon as winemaker, they invited other members of the team they'd worked with at Araujo to join them for Accendo.

'Part of what stands out about Bart and Daphne', says Peschon, 'is the longevity of the relationships behind their wines.' Consultants and employees, from blending advisors to biodynamics practitioners, accountants to label designers, have worked for the family for decades. Some of them for so long that it is not the original employee but their children now working for the Araujos.

'They've created a culture of collaboration', says Greg. 'All these people stick around a very long time because they like to learn and work together. People stick around for either six weeks, or a very long time.'

But those long-term working relationships are also about finding people with synchronous standards, a team working towards the same goal. For the Araujos, that goal has been to continually hone and improve not only to capture wine quality, but also to refine the innumerable details that go into making fine wine.

'At Araujo [estate], we felt strongly about doing right by the land, and we were able to turn to organic farming early because we had someone to coach us', says Daphne. 'It was the same with biodynamics.' In 1998, they were among the first in the region to not only convert to organics but also get certified. In 2000, they went further and added biodynamic practices and certification. What biodynamics provided was not merely a way to farm, but a demand to farm attentively.

'With both schools, organics or biodynamics, they require you to question every decision whether in the vineyard or the winery. That way of thinking helps you improve on all aspects of sustainability', says Bart, 'not only the vineyard and cellar, but even packaging.' Today, they are studying ways to reduce their footprint through how they bottle and ship Accendo.



A surprise celebration, with Dom Pérignon, of Peschon's 30th year. Left to right: Jaime Araujo, Bart Araujo, Françoise Peschon, Peschon's daughter and assistant winemaker for Kinsman Wine Consulting Isabelle Straka, Daphne Araujo, Accendo's DTC sales director Mikael Tigrett and Accendo cellarmaster, and formerly Araujo Estate's cellarmaster, Cesar Sandoval (image © Suzanne Becker Bronk from Accendo)

With Accendo, the family no longer makes a wine overseeing every step from vine to bottle. They instead source fruit from top vineyards throughout the region, many owned by long-term friends, to make two

archetypal Napa Valley wines, one white and one red. The vineyards are selected based on the eye for quality they learned at Araujo estate.

Winemaking is guided through the collaboration of Peschon with winemaker Nigel Kinsman. Peschon hired and mentored Kinsman at Araujo estate beginning in 2010. After the sale to Artémis, Kinsman stayed to assist in the transition for the new team, while Peschon helped start Accendo.

Then in 2016, Kinsman and Peschon began collaborating on Accendo with Kinsman primarily focused on the red with help from Peschon while Peschon is responsible for the white. Two years later, they realised they had the ability to also make a second red wine, Laurea, a Cabernet sourced from the same top sites as Accendo but made to be a little more approachable at a lower price point.

Peschon and winemaking

Peschon stands unique in Napa Valley. It is common for consultants in the region to become famous in wine, their fame serving as part of the bartering system for new winemaking jobs. Peschon instead prefers to stay focused.

She takes consulting roles that give her the opportunity to mentor another winemaker. It's a commitment to the future talents of northern California, as much as the multi-generational investment needed to truly create fine wine. She favours lead winemaker jobs that focus on a single estate.

'Making a wine only from one site through an estate programme means having total control', says Peschon. 'That was cemented with the Araujos by Eisele vineyard. The team worked together for one goal, to make something that has a voice and is distinctive.' Peschon worked for the Araujos at Eisele for two decades.

In 2008, the Araujos introduced her to the Phillips family. With their Vine Hill Ranch in the Oakville section of the Mayacamas Bench, they had sold fruit to some of Napa's most coveted historic wines since the 1960s. She helped them create VHR, their first foray into winemaking, and became their estate winemaker. VHR is not the region's most famed wine, but it is one of its most admired, a Cabernet sought out by those who know. The Phillips family just launched a second wine from the estate's younger vines, also made by Peschon, named Baker & Hamilton.

Partnering with VHR vineyard manager Mike Wolf, Peschon also now makes Heimark, an estate Cabernet grown on the slopes of Dutch Henry Canyon east of Calistoga. Wolf also connected her to the estate Almacerro, a remote rocky outcropping on Howell Mountain. She now serves as consulting winemaker, mentoring winemaker Matilda Scott.

And she also serves as consultant to Cornell, a Cabernet from the Fountaingrove area, on Sonoma's upper slopes of the Mayacamas Mountains west of the Spring Mountain District. There she helped hire winemaker Elizabeth Tangney, and now serves as her consultant and mentor.

What the wines have in common is Peschon's devotion to structure, a respect for tannin, acidity, and freshness not always common today in Cabernet. They achieve differing levels of detail or refinement, but each feels like an honest expression of their place for those of us lucky enough to know the intimate recesses of northern California.

What they also share is a practice of winemaking based in long-term relationships, a practice instilled at least partially through her work with the Araujos. ‘It’s about finding people with the same motivations and values’, says Daphne. ‘We are aligned for the same goal.’

‘What has made these different relationship work’, says Bart, ‘is respect that comes from mutual work. We’re working together on the same project.’

The wines

There follow tasting notes from the wines tasted while meeting with the Araujo family and Françoise Peschon, listed older to younger.

Araujo, Eisele Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 1993 Napa Valley 18

92% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot. This was the first vintage made with Françoise Peschon as winemaker, as well as the first vintage with Cabernet Franc. It was also the first full harvest for the Araujo family of Eisele vineyard, as the 1991 was shared with Joseph Phelps, and the 1992 included loss of fruit due to weather. This wine represents the beginning of the collaboration of winemaker Françoise Peschon with Bart and Daphne Araujo.

The 1993 Araujo Cabernet is still impressively energetic, persistent and beautiful. There is a wealth of complexity on the nose followed by a luxurious mouthfeel with plenty of length. Notes of sautéed white mushrooms, light tobacco leaf, warm porcini, graphite, and a cascade of red fruits – fresh and dried – lift from the nose and follow into the palate for an impressively aged wine. I recommend drinking it now but it will surely still offer several more years in bottle as well. It is both delicious and beautiful. A treat. (ECB) 13.5%

Drink 2000 – 2027

Accendo Cellars Sauvignon Blanc 2013 Napa Valley 17

85% Sauvignon Blanc, 15% Sémillon. Made by Françoise Peschon for the Araujo family. This is the first vintage of Accendo.

Opening with a mix of white fig, white peach and grapefruit pith, the 2013 carries fresh fruits from the nose through palate, followed by savoury tones and a silken mouthfeel. It offers nice depth with a balance of flesh and acidity. A beautiful, sophisticated wine with elegance, power and precision. An example of how much the variety can offer in this region. (ECB) 14.5%

Drink 2016 – 2028

Accendo Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 Napa Valley

17.5 +

This is the first vintage of Accendo. Made by Françoise Peschon for the Araujo family. 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from Vinehill Ranch and Oakville Ranch.

The aromas offer a mix of savoury characteristics with fresh black berries and plums. There is a light note of dark chocolate and light spice that is well integrated. Together they bring depth and density to the palate as well as vibrant fresh acidity and a lightly tactile, fine-grained tannin. The wine still has enough tension to benefit from decanting and will age a very long time. 2013 is regarded as one of Napa Valley's most structural vintages. That character shows here but Peschon has also brought an elegant expression of a powerful vintage, which is impressive. This wine drinks with power moving through grace. (ECB) 14.8%
Drink 2020 – 2040

Accendo Cellars Sauvignon Blanc 2016 Napa Valley

17.5

86% Sauvignon Blanc, 14% Sémillon. Made by Françoise Peschon for the Araujo family.

Lovely freshness on the nose with a light touch of grapefruit pith, white fig and a hint of sweet citrus like clementine carries through the palate as well. The wine is in an elegant phase of ageing with a silken mouthfeel and a slightly introspective character. Still, there is plenty of flavour intensity with a pleasing mix of fruits, a savoury through line, an impressive textural mouthfeel and lots of length. (ECB) 14.2%
Drink 2020 – 2030

Accendo Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 Napa Valley

18

The Araujo family and the Accendo winemaking moved into their Wheeler Farms location in Napa Valley in 2016. The wine was made by Nigel Kinsman and Françoise Peschon, who had previously worked together at Araujo. 81% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Cabernet Franc, 4% Petit Verdot. The fruit comes from several sites along the Mayacamas bench with a little fruit from Diamond Mountain.

The aromas here open more apparently focused on fruit compared with the 2013 vintage. This continues into the palate picking up notes of graphite, dark chocolate and integrated spice. This wine is still in its more primary phase in the sense of being still young in the bottle, but it offers detail and complexity that gives good promise for its long-term quality. The tannin is ample while almost powdery fine and offers just enough grip in the mouth, while being set alongside persistent, mouth-watering acidity. It will benefit with air upon opening and being served alongside a meal. There is a light touch of fresh pyrazine here that is pleasing and avoids any sense of excess greenness. Pleasing, silken mouthfeel.

(ECB) 15.1%

Drink 2020 – 2045

Accendo Cellars Sauvignon Blanc 2020 Napa Valley

17.5 +

80% Sauvignon Blanc, 20% Sémillon. Made by Françoise Peschon for the Araujo family.

Fresh stone fruits lift from the glass, followed by pithy citrus and integrated spice. There is a fresh and pleasing elegance and a silken, persistent mouthfeel. Notes of white fig mix with white nectarine and grapefruit with the fruits well balanced by a lightly bitter accent that makes the mouth water and brings an overarching sense of freshness. A nice use of Sémillon to bring fullness to the mid palate while retaining elegance. This is a lovely wine, and will likely gain even more depth with more time in bottle. (ECB) 14.2%

Drink 2024 – 2036

\$80 RRP