

The *Decanter* interview

Paul Hobbs

Described as ‘the Steve Jobs of wine’, this busy consultant winemaker has a hand in projects across four continents. Peter Richards MW catches up with him to discuss his career, influences and winemaking style

SPACE. THAT’S WHERE Paul Hobbs was initially destined. A child of the 1960s, he loved maths, chemistry and physics. ‘I passionately wanted to become an astronaut,’ he recounts. But the doctor put paid to any flying aspirations with an abrupt diagnosis of amblyopia, or lazy eye. ‘I was crushed, crestfallen. At 16, I had to figure out what to do. So I took another approach.’

Challenges, and overcoming them, are an intriguing part of his story. No one gets to the top tier of their profession – where Hobbs unquestionably is, being one of the world’s highest profile winemakers and consultants – without determination and resilience. Yet with Hobbs you get the sense that he relishes the struggle itself.

When I quiz him about the secret of his success, he says: ‘Being told “no” is a good way to motivate me. I like challenges. I’m not afraid of hard work and I like doing things people don’t think is possible. I’m always pushing against the establishment. I love adventure.’ And there he is: the astronaut, vaguely professorial in demeanour, jaw set, plotting his moon shoot.

Farm boy

Wine didn’t figure in Hobbs’ wildest aspirations early on. One of 11 children, growing up on a fruit farm in upstate New York not far from Lake Ontario, the family was largely teetotal, his mother keen to set the kids a good example. Milk was the drink on

‘I’m not afraid of hard work and I like doing things people don’t think is possible’

the family table. That is, until one fateful day when his father brought home a bottle of Château d’Yquem 1962. Hobbs relates how, that same evening, a decision was made to plant vines on the farm.

Though much has been made of this so-called epiphany, in truth, concedes Hobbs, it was just as much a commercial decision: his father was keen to diversify. And it certainly wasn’t a Damascene conversion for Hobbs himself, for whom the ‘brutal’ experience of work on the farm after school – no sports for him, instead long afternoons toiling, in sub-zero conditions during winter – had taken its toll. ‘All I knew was that I didn’t want to work on a farm or have anything to do with farming.’ He liked science and helping people, so he took himself off to study medicine at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, with the aim of becoming a surgeon.

Things didn’t quite work out that way. At Notre Dame he crossed paths with botany professor (and wine lover) Rev James McGrath who, discovering Hobbs’ family was planting a vineyard, pressed him into joining a wine tasting group and later ‘colluded’ with Hobbs’ father to send him not to medical school but to Davis in California to study winemaking. The paternal aim was for Hobbs to then return to the farm in New York State and establish a winery there, with winemaking becoming a family undertaking.

Instead, Hobbs got caught up in the burgeoning wine scene in California,



Paul Hobbs at a glance

Born 1953, Buffalo, New York State

Education BSc in Chemistry (University of Notre Dame, 1975); MSc in Viticulture and Oenology (UC Davis, 1978)

Career Robert Mondavi Winery, Opus One, Simi Winery, multiple consultancies

Core winemaking projects Paul Hobbs Winery (California, established 1991), Viña Cobos (Argentina, 1998), CrossBarn (California, 2000), Yacoubian-Hobbs (Armenia, 2008), Crocus (Cahors, 2011), Hillick & Hobbs (New York, 2013), untitled Ribeira Sacra project (2017)

Family Two daughters, Sophia and Louisa, with his wife Cristina; one daughter, Agustina, from his first marriage



Above: Joan and Edward Hobbs at their fruit farm with six of their 11 children, (from left) Greg, Dean, Paul, Debbie, Forrest and Chris

initially working with Mondavi and Opus One in Napa, then Simi Winery in Sonoma. Consultancies ensued – beginning with Bodega Catena Zapata in Argentina and followed by numerous others in South and North America – as did his own ventures, including Paul Hobbs Winery in California, then Viña Cobos in Argentina. Other initiatives followed, including joint ventures in Armenia (Yacoubian-Hobbs) and France (Crocus in Cahors, with Bertrand Gabriel Vigouroux). His two most recent projects are in Spain's Ribeira Sacra and, tellingly, a return to New York State, in the Finger Lakes region.

Napa novice

It's a far cry from his early days at Mondavi when he was, as Hobbs puts it, 'The lowest paid but most highly qualified winemaker on the 200-plus winery staff.' While still studying at Davis, Hobbs had been so impressed by the rigour and detail of Mondavi's operation during a tour that he went straight to Bob Mondavi and announced that he wanted to work for the company and would do it for free. He started off in research, micro-vinifying to study oak or maceration times, but spending so much time on the donkey work that he felt that he'd become, 'the world's leading expert on washing glass ferment vessels, with a Masters degree!' But he saw the value. 'It toughened me up,' he says.

Such toughness didn't make for plain sailing. While at Mondavi, he admits to 'butting heads' with winemaker Zelma Long. He also formed an under-the-radar, after-hours group dubbed Skunkworks to study different aspects of winemaking and challenge accepted norms. He claims, 'We became the epicentre of development at Mondavi.'

After being moved onto the newly formed Opus One project because, 'Mondavi thought



Above: Paul Hobbs is happiest in the vineyard, where he says he can find 'serenity' Left: Stagecoach Vineyard in Napa Valley

factor. Better farming is key. It all comes back to the vineyard.'

Hobbs is at pains to emphasise his focus on viticulture. Reducing pesticides, encouraging better trellising and canopy management, healthy soils and plot selection are all critical in his book. Within this context, he rejects the notion that the scientific system is his only methodology. 'It's an interesting way to structure your thought process,' he states. 'But it's not enough to make a good wine. Not even close. To make a really great wine, you have to feel it. It takes years of experience to get it. For example, I now make picking decisions largely on taste – and it's not just flavour but other, less obvious things, such as texture.' He's described his winemaking approach as, 'one part science, three parts intuition'.

In search of balance

Picking decisions are an important issue with Hobbs because he's often cited as

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to those who work alongside him – but what's also interesting to note is how this isn't the end of the story. Santiago Deicas of Familia Deicas in Uruguay, for example, explains how Hobbs has reduced their use of oak and sulphur dioxide, emphasised the importance of cleanliness and, 'changed the whole winemaking culture'. However, Hobbs interjects, 'In order to do that, the condition and quality of the grapes is the number one

Below: Viña Cobos winery in Luján de Cuyo, Argentina



Above: the Paul Hobbs Winery in California, ready for action during another harvest

my qualifications would impress the French,' Hobbs soon saw the irony as he came into conflict with what he perceived as the 'dogmatic, ideological' approach of his French colleagues. He cites the 'protocol-based, heavy use of egg whites to fine, altering the flavour of the wine and encouraging the development of spoilage yeast brettanomyces. 'It bothered me,' he avers, adding, 'We had a serious clash of cultures.'

Science and vines

Hobbs' scientific rigour, attention to detail and an insistence on good hygiene in the winery central to his winemaking approach, according



Photographs: Mitch Tobias, Tara Sharp, Paul Hobbs Winery



Above: the Yacoubian-Hobbs estate vineyard in Armenia

producing ripe, generous wines notably high in alcohol. ‘In the early days, I leant towards the French model,’ he says, ‘with lower maturity, more acidity. Then [American wine critic Robert] Parker came along and became a dominant force; people wouldn’t buy your wines if Parker hadn’t sanctioned them.

Everyone tried to get on that bandwagon: tell me someone who’s not going to want to be part of that club! It’s important to sell what you make. So sure, I was on board. But I never went over to full sweetness – some made sweet wines without texture or structure – I always wanted backbone and tension.’

Hobbs notes how he is reducing, ‘the imprint of oak’ on his wines but rejects the notion that high alcohol is inherently detrimental to quality, insisting that conflating high alcohol and overripeness is, ‘a mistake’. He explains: ‘When you’re dealing with really fresh fruit that’s not overripe, alcohol is irrelevant. ‘My objective is to make wine that tastes good. I abhor wines that are underripe or overripe. I’m looking for balance.’ (For more on this topic, see ‘Big and Beautiful’, p38.)

Hobbs acknowledges that he’s ‘caught up in a constantly evolving dynamic’, but insists on one thing: ‘Trueness of place: wine should give a sense of place, it’s about balance and beauty.’ For him, this aim can co-exist with crafting wine styles that he unashamedly describes as, ‘powerful, exuberant, intensely flavoured, richly textured.’

At the moment, Hobbs notes that he’s ‘got a lot going on’, taking care of ventures on four continents. His current clients include: Pulenta

Estate, Familia Schroeder, Bodegas Toso, all in Argentina; Familia Deicas in Uruguay; the VSPT Wine Group with wineries in Chile and Argentina; Valdivieso and Viu Manent in Chile; Brave & Maiden in California; and Early Mountain in Virginia.

Looking ahead

‘I hope the future doesn’t mean more projects!’ he grins. But peace and quiet doesn’t look set to feature heavily in his immediate destiny. While he admits to being happiest ‘in the vineyard, when I can get a sort of serenity’, he is also, ‘very happy travelling’ plus has young daughters aged one and four, ‘and I love wrestling with them!’

His new ventures also look set to be a major focus. He’s named his Finger Lakes project Hillick & Hobbs (Hillick being his mother’s maiden name). He tells me that his mother cried when he made his initial decision to go into wine (‘she was devastated’) but is ‘fine’ now, happy for his success. Hobbs’ father died in 2002 in a car crash while returning from pruning vines. The family winemaking operation never did happen. ‘My father died doing what he loved, anyway,’ muses Hobbs, noting how his Hillick & Hobbs initiative is like a version of his father’s dream.

It reminds me of a comment that Hobbs made when I asked him about the importance of wine. ‘It’s the fabric of life; it connects us with people. It allows you to smell the flowers and enjoy life a little bit.’ Wine may not have been written in his stars, but he’s made good sense of it since. **D**



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