

SUCCESS FROM THE GROUND UP

Top US winemaker Paul Hobbs made his name by divorcing himself from one of the world's most powerful wine companies and ignoring the advice of his winemaking professors. He tells **LINDA MURPHY** why


It's very tempting to call Paul Hobbs the American Michel Rolland. Like Bordeaux's gallivanting consultant winemaker, Hobbs has his own successful wine brands (Paul Hobbs Wines in California and Viña Cobos in Argentina) and makes a significant living as a consultant for some three dozen wineries in California, Argentina, Chile and Hungary. Hobbs, however, cites a couple of fundamental differences.

'Michel's approach is more laboratory and blending room-focused, whereas mine is from the ground up,' says Hobbs on a sunny August day in Sonoma's Russian River Valley, site of his winery and 5.6ha (hectare) Lindsay Vineyard. 'I came to consulting by chance, but for Michel it was his business. Consulting wasn't a priority, but I enjoyed it and learnt so much.' Yet it was Hobbs's 10-year consulting stint in Argentina (he began in 1989) for Nicolás Catena at Bodega Catena Zapata in Mendoza, that made the creation of Paul Hobbs Wines possible.

Hobbs' first paid winemaking job was at Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville, in 1978. Working there until 1984, he had a

hand in the creation of Opus One for partners Mondavi and Baron Philippe de Rothschild. In 1985, Hobbs shifted to Simi Winery in Sonoma County's Alexander Valley, as assistant winemaker, eventually rising to vice-president/winemaker. He left in 1989 when its parent company, Louis Vuitton-Moët Hennessy, viewed his consulting work for Catena, near LVMH's Bodegas Chandon, as sleeping with the enemy. Despite doing the sideline in his vacation time, Hobbs was forced to choose between Simi and consulting. He picked the latter, and packed his bags for Mendoza.

But why Argentina? 'The people at [University of California] Davis and others told me Argentina was too hot, good only for making plonk,' Hobbs says. 'It was a shock when I saw it in 1988. The vineyards were so beautiful and the fruit tasted so good.' And why Catena? 'We had the chance to do groundbreaking work. I could see the potential. It was a privilege to try to change the industry. Once I saw what Argentina was, I knew there was something big there. And Catena had the means and strategy to make it happen. >



'I fell in love with the Russian River area because the lay of the land reminded me of home in upstate New York'

HOBBS AT A GLANCE

Born: Buffalo, New York, 1953

Lives: Sebastopol, California

Family: Divorced. Daughter Agustina (b 1994)

Education: Chemistry degree, Notre Dame University; masters degree, in oenology and viticulture, UC Davis

Epiphany wine: Château d'Yquem, 1962, first tasted in 1969

Clients include: Vinorum, Vistalba and Xumek in Argentina; MontGras, Odjfell, Southern Sun, Veramonte, Viña San Pedro in Chile; Arvay in Hungary and Merus in Napa Valley

He says: 'Tension creates depth and intrigue in wine.'

They say: 'Paul Hobbs' Beckstoffer, To-Kalon Vineyard Cabernet 2006 represents Oakville's answer to Mouton Rothschild or Latour.'

Robert Parker



'I was still hungry for more challenge, and Nicolás knew I wanted to start my own winery. That's how Paul Hobbs Winery came to be. Nicolás was one of the investors and helped me to get started. This was in 1991, a time of phylloxera, and no one wanted to put cash into someone new. Except him.'

In Mendoza, Hobbs initially swam against the tide, teaching Catena's workers how to prune for smaller crop loads, reduce irrigation to control vine vigour, and tackle oxidation and sanitation problems in the cellar. Focused at first on Chardonnay, Hobbs convinced Catena that Malbec would be an export hit, by importing the Catena wines himself to the US. Mendoza winemakers eventually noticed Hobbs' work and the quality of the Catena wines, and he began consulting for other producers.

With the Catena family as one of a dozen silent partners, Paul Hobbs Wines began in 1991 with bottling from two prime vineyards, the Hyde Vineyard in Napa Carneros and Richard Dinner Vineyard on Sonoma Mountain. Today, Hobbs makes about 11 vineyard-designated wines each year: Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Syrahs from Carneros and Sonoma County, and Cabernet Sauvignons from Napa.

The winery was completed in 2003, located in the Russian River Valley near Sebastopol. 'I fell in love with the area. The lay of the land reminded me of home,' says Hobbs, raised in upstate New York, where his father, Ed, was a farmer.

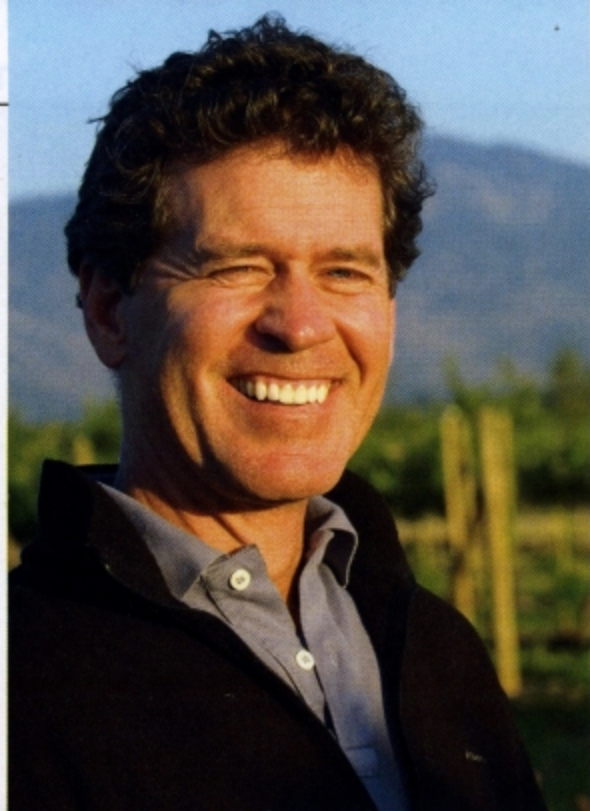
In 1998, Hobbs and partners Andrea Marchiori and Luis Barraud founded Viña Cobos in the Perdriel district of Mendoza, where they produce Chardonnay, Malbec, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Hobbs describes his wines as 'embracing the ripe, forward expression to which the landscape and culture of California naturally lend themselves'. The wines are rich, ripe and potent, yet with good structure and crisp acidity. Robert Parker agrees, rarely giving a score below 90 to Hobbs' California wines.

Undoubtedly, his wines are impeccably made and among the most sought-after in America. They aren't inexpensive: the Beckstoffer To-Kalon Vineyard Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 is \$225 (£130), though this is only half the price of Screaming Eagle and Harlan Estate. Hobbs' single-site Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Syrahs command \$90 (£52) per bottle.

For those critics and consumers who rail about overripeness and high alcohol levels in California wines, Hobbs has a reply. 'The British were partially correct in identifying that producers were going too far to ripeness – making wines without texture, without structure; wines that were sweet. You have to manage acidity and how you treat the wine in the vineyard.' You also have to be able to sell what you make, though.

'I spent some time in Burgundy with [Henri] Jayet, and I was determined to make that style of wine in California, by picking earlier,' Hobbs says. 'But people didn't want it. So I changed my Pinot Noir in 1997 [to a more opulent wine]. Bright, fresh fruit is critical. Balance, supple tannins, ageability, but not with burning acid. Ripe tannins equal texture. In some [hot] years, it's impossible to get tannins ripe at lower sugars. I don't want the alcohol to be more than 15%; 14.8% to 15% is okay, and acidity is important for fruit freshness.'

Hobbs travels five months a year for Viña Cobos, other consulting projects and selling his own wines. In 2004, he began working in Hungary at Arvay winery in Tokaj. 'Tokaj needs to



Paul Hobbs (above) consults for 12 Argentinian wineries, including Viña Cobos in Mendoza (left), which he co-founded in 1998

focus on dry wines,' he says. 'It can't survive on stickies. I'm looking for something other than Furmint and Hárslevelű. Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc will be great in Tokaj. It has very diverse soils. But Hungary is a huge challenge as technology and the understanding

of basic winemaking lapsed during the Communist era. Good lab technicians are hard to come by.'

Hobbs no longer consults for Catena, though he maintains 12 other Argentinian clients. What's left for him in Mendoza? 'The biggest challenge in Argentina is that it's so new and developing so fast. For most serious folks there, it's all about Malbec, but I want to see what Cabernet Sauvignon does too. It requires a rigorous approach – the clusters must be open, the green notes made tolerable.'

Hobbs' father was influential in his son's interest in the earth. Hobbs recalls driving with him in Niagara County, New York, and discovering how soils affected the flavour of local apples. Later, while studying oenology and viticulture at Davis, 'It was all about climate, not soils,' Hobbs recalls. 'At Mondavi, I couldn't get into the vineyards. It was tough at Simi, too. But I kept my focus on bringing a sense of place to the wines. My father was a self-employed man, so he wasn't too thrilled when I went to work at Mondavi – but I needed the background. I have the same entrepreneurial drive as he does.'

What's next for the peripatetic Hobbs? 'Maybe Oregon,' he says. 'Perhaps Sonoma Mountain for Pinot Noir. And Armenia is a possible project that thrills me.'

He often travels with his teenage daughter, Agustina, who divides her time between Sebastopol and Mendoza, where her mother, Hobbs' ex-wife, lives. Apparently, the trick to working on three continents is 'having the right people in place'. 'I trust my team, and it's taken me a long time to build it,' Hobbs says. 'My schedule is heavy, but incredibly exciting.' **D**