

Mike Dunn

'This wine is a homage to my father Randy', Mike Dunn explains, as he pipettes a sample of 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon. 'The Trailer Vineyard was planted in 1972, and it's been at the core of our wines from the start. When we had to replant in 2014, I decided we should bottle this separately.'

Even after 30 months in barrel, the resulting wine remains massive and untamed: inky, uncompromisingly structured, intense. It represents the essence of the brooding, long-lived wines Dunn Vineyards have crafted on Napa Valley's Howell Mountain ever since Randy Dunn's debut vintage in 1979. It might be one of the greatest wines the Dunns have made.

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Such a serious a vinous tribute gives some idea of how much Mike respects and admires his stepfather (he typically omits the prefix). And as Mike takes over the reins from Randy in the vineyard and the cellar, he is intent on honouring everything Dunn Vineyards has come to stand for.

Working with his notoriously stubborn stepfather, however, hasn't always been easy. As a boy, Mike never shared his contemporaries' eager anticipation of the summer vacation: all he had to look forward to were long hours of hard work during harvest. And throughout the rest of the year there were always vines to be trained and pruned. He never

envisaged working at the winery. 'I guess I didn't feel there was space for me,' he admits. 'My dad likes things to be done his way. And to be fair, he'd always say, "You don't want to work for me!"'

So, after graduating from UC Davis with an anthropology major, Mike set up a bike shop in the sleepy resort town of Calistoga. It was only after the premature passing of his sister Jenny in 1999 that he decided to come home to Dunn Vineyards, signing up as a 'cellar grunt' – a designation his business card bears to this day. 'I started on \$15 an hour. Of course, Randy wanted to start me on \$10.'

Mike's unpretentiously perfectionist and inquisitive temperament soon had him taking an increasing role in decision-making. The spoilage yeast *brettanomyces*, for example, had infiltrated the cellar with the 1998 vintage, and he devoted considerable energy to taming it, changing sanitation protocols and replacing contaminated barrels.

And the choice of new barrels also aroused his curiosity. 'Randy's consideration when it came to new oak was always cost-effectiveness,' Mike explains. 'He'd only use 50% new, but seek out the most impactful, wide-grain barrels possible: it was about maximum value for money.'

Under Mike, that has changed: the Dunns use more new wood, but choose less aggressive, tight-grain wood, and coopers (from Bordeaux, Burgundy and even Italy) whose styles synergise with their mountain fruit. The resulting wines are just as structured, but more refined; a change that has surprised some long-time customers accustomed to Randy's sometimes brutally tannic bottlings.

Of course, there have been conflicts between father and son over the years. 'Buying a forklift and bin-dumper was like passing an Act of Congress,' Mike recalls, as the

always-parsimonious Randy believed in doing everything by hand to cut costs. 'And I have to do all the work de-alcoholising [to below 14%. I'd rather let the wine be what it is.'

Mike would simply pick earlier than Randy opts to. Experimenting with his own Petite Sirah label, Retro Cellars, Mike has found that in vintages when he had to harvest earlier than he'd intended, the resulting wines have become more interesting with age. So though alcohol-reduction will be consigned to history when Mike takes charge entirely, the Dunns' classically balanced, ageworthy style is not going to change any time soon.

'My intention has never been to change the style', Mike reaffirms. And as one generation gives way to another, there is something reassuring about the sense of continuity that pervades this family-run, low-tech but deeply compelling Napa Valley winery.

Two to try

Dunn Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley, California, USA 2000 95

£129.99 **The Winery**

As it reaches 16 years of age, the 2000 Howell Mountain Cabernet is beginning to blossom, its expressive and savoury bouquet brimming with cool cassis, liquorice, cigar box and grilled meat. Juicy, complex and authoritative on the palate, it is underpinned by bright acids and classic mountain tannins. Decant for a few hours to let it really expatiate.

Drink 2016-2040 **Alc** 13.6%

Dunn Vineyards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California, USA 2011 94

£74.99 **The Winery**

Aromas of crushed blackcurrant, woodsmoke, graphite and rich earth introduce a fresh, supple and intense wine structured around refined tannins. Mike Dunn really triumphed in the challenging 2011 vintage, producing this elegant but powerful bottling entirely from Howell Mountain grapes.

Drink 2016-2033 **Alc** 14%

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