

# SOME FRUIT DOESN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE—OR THE VINE.

Winemaking is a tradition that often gets passed down through the generations. We caught up with three young winemakers who each inherited their parents' or grandparents' craft. Each is loyal to tradition but prone to changing the wine business in large and small ways to make it fit their 21<sup>st</sup>-century sensibilities, in turn helping their family's estates keep evolving and flourishing. Their paths are different—one traveled the world, one's just getting started and one's throwing in the towel—but each is smart, savvy and unafraid of the challenges ahead. Turns out sometimes it's not your daddy's vineyard—even when it is.

## THE ACCIDENTAL FARMER

Lisa Togni, Philip Togni Vineyard, St. Helena, California

Despite growing up on a vineyard in Napa Valley, Lisa Togni never expected to wind up in her family's business. "I was born and grew up in St. Helena, and I was very keen to get out of there as soon as I turned 18," the 41-year-old admits. She dreamed of traveling the world. But her fall into wine was a happy accident. Temping just out of college, her first placement happened to be for the Wine Institute, a California trade organization. One wine job led to another, and before long, Togni had gained a new perspective on her family's boutique winery. "I realized, working for other people, what a great thing my dad had with a winery that was focused on being small and high-quality," she says. "That was something I wanted to do—I wanted to work with him and learn from him."

Pascal Brooks in the vineyard at Brooks Wines in Amity, Oregon.



John Yeats

At 31, Togni returned to the family's estate to make wine with her parents. Philip Togni Vineyard is a small operation—other than her father, Philip, who heads up the winemaking, and her mother, Birgitta Togni, who manages the business side and welcomes visitors, there's a permanent staff of only three—so Lisa has been able to be involved in all aspects of production and sales. She prefers working on the production end of things, but she's proven to be a sharp sales strategist, having earned an MBA from the University of San Francisco in 1996. "Selling wine is more challenging now than it has been in the past, and I don't think it's enough to just make good wines—you've got to have the sales emphasis and savvy to be able to get your wine on the market," she says.

While Togni is happy to preserve the traditional, small-production style she and her father learned in Bordeaux (she worked harvest at Château Léoville-Barton in 1996; he was



formerly assistant director at Château Lascombes), she's not averse to incorporating a few innovations, including an ozone machine and a high-tech bottling machine that she learned about while working harvests in Australia in 2001 and 2002. Togni and her father, Philip, work side by side in the winemaking process, and they want to keep it that way, so they're staying small. Working closely with her father has been challenging at times, but also extremely rewarding. "You're definitely dealing with family dynamics," she says. "You have the normal disagreements that you tend to have with your parents, but we've both been happy working together and building something we're really proud of."

For her father, having Lisa on board provides a sense of security. "Now that he's getting a little bit older, it's nice knowing that he's not going to have to give up the winery, or sell it, or hire someone he might not totally trust to run things," she

adds. The best part, says Philip, is the ability to share ideas. "As father and daughter, we have a great deal in common," he says.

Last year, Togni gave birth to a son, Peter, and already, the question arises of whether or not he will end up in the business as well. "We'll see what he ends up wanting to do," Togni says. "If he does want to [carry on the business] I think it would be great, but just the way my parents never forced me or expected me to do it, I definitely won't be doing that for him."

## THE KID

Pascal Brooks, Brooks Wines, Amity, Oregon

At 15, Pascal Brooks is America's youngest winery owner. He's heir to Brooks Wines, an Oregon producer of organic and biodynamic Pinot Noirs and Rieslings. But even as a very young child, he was on the purple path. "I always wanted to be a

winemaker,” Brooks says. “I can remember having wine stains on my jackets after crush when I was 6.”

Pascal’s father, Jimi Brooks, passed away unexpectedly when Pascal was 8, leaving the winery to his son. Jimi’s family and friends banded together to continue production and open a path for Pascal to carry on his father’s tradition when he feels ready, should he so choose. “It was my choice to keep it going,” says Pascal’s aunt, Janie Brooks Heuck, who runs her late brother’s winery while Pascal attends school in Pittsburgh where he lives with his mother. “There is no pressure for Pascal to take it on.”

Still, Pascal chooses to fly to Oregon to help at the winery during his vacations from school. And he says he plans to honor his father’s tradition and continue making the wines—which appeared recently at a White House dinner—even more successful. “I really want to carry on my father’s legacy and help broaden the market for wine of that nature,” he says.

He’s already starting to add his own personality and presence to Brooks where he can. “I love helping out at the winery,” he says. “During harvest I sort fruit, do punch-downs, clean bins, and help around. The greatest feeling in the world is when you’re cold, your hands and arms are sticky with juice, your muscles ache, and a soft rain hits your face as you sort fruit. That’s my favorite job to do at the winery.” He’s also starting to dip his toes in the marketing side, helping to design labels, writing for the newsletter and website, speaking at winery events and helping in the tasting room (though he’s not old enough to serve wine).

If not a winemaker, Brooks says he might have wanted to be a doctor, but he feels at ease with his path. “My friends think it’s cool, and I love seeing the expression on people’s faces when I tell them I own a winery,” he says. “It’s funnier to see the parents’ reactions. I bring many of my friends’ parents my wine and they understand how special it is for me to give them that.”

Brooks plans to attend college, then gain working experience at other wineries before finally settling down in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, where Janie and head winemaker Chris Williams will fully induct him into the ways of the business. “My hope for him is that he lives a happy, passionate life like his dad did,” says his aunt Brooks Heuck. “Everything I see in him is so much like Jimi—I think he may be in charge of Brooks before we know it.” Until then, he gets to enjoy being a kid.

## THE DREAMER

Naomi Brilliant, Roshambo Farms, Healdsburg, California

Wine was always a part of life for Naomi Brilliant, 38, who founded Roshambo Winery a decade ago and ran it until last year, when she decided to leave the business. As a kid growing up in Chico, Calif., she visited her grandparents’ Sonoma Valley vineyard every year, but it wasn’t until years later that she felt a connection that pulled her to winemaking. “I thought it was interesting that different appellations and vintages could make wine taste different,” she recalls.

Brilliant went to college for photography and spent her early twenties working as a photographer in Portland, Oregon, but after her grandparents passed away, she moved back to Healdsburg at the age of 28 to build a winery on their land. Her grandfather had always wanted to build a winery, and he’d left the land where he’d grown grapes in a trust split six ways between Brilliant and her brother, uncle and some cousins. The others opted out, leaving Brilliant to carry the torch. “I took over out of necessity,” she says. “It was the challenge of the business [that attracted me]. No one I knew at the time would even buy a bottle of wine—it was too intimidating.”

Brilliant wasn’t coming to the endeavor with a business background or connections in the wine establishment, and that, she says, gave her freedom to create a different kind of winery. From the get-go, she became known for her big personality and knack as a host, throwing quirky events attended by the San Francisco Bay Area’s young, edgy tastemakers: art shows, rock-paper-scissors tournaments, drag brunches. “The less real wine experience you have, the better,” Brilliant says. “Most people in this business have a very myopic view of their customers. I’m not caught in the ‘how to do things’ aspect, which kills the business for new-to-wine people.” Brilliant had a wide-ranging view of who her fans might be and, sure enough, she attracted customers who might not normally visit wineries: nonconformists. “People who don’t like wine snobs [came to Roshambo]—people who take vacations to adventure in strange lands,” she says.

Roshambo’s events drew attention, and the wines were well-received—an early unoaked Chardonnay, one of the first of its kind, won the Sonoma County Harvest Fair prize. “Whether people hated us or loved us, we incited a reaction, which is more than I can say for other wineries out there,” she reflects. But despite a strong following, a weak economy and the high cost of doing business made it tough to make a living. After a whirlwind decade, Brilliant ultimately shut down the winery in 2010 and transitioned to organic farming. While some parts of the journey had been fulfilling, the business side was gnawing at her. “Aspects were fun—having events, art shows, meeting new people,” she says. “But selling wine is a business—it has nothing to do with wine quality.” The decisive moment came when her uncle and cousins asked to be bought out, which required cashing out stock and taking out loans. “As the person in the middle of it all, I became depressed and knew that I wouldn’t be able to change anything or make people happy.”

These days, Brilliant is inspired once again—this time she’s plowing under a few of the grapevines and planting vegetables in their place, with help from her boyfriend Timothy Holt (who owns Weird Fish restaurant in San Francisco) and Brilliant’s 8-year-old son Justice. Might Justice be the fourth generation to work this land? “I want him to do what makes him happy,” she says. “Right now, he wants to be a baseball player. I would never push this life on him. I just want him to respect the land and work for the betterment of humanity.”

And does Brilliant miss wine? “I still drink it pretty much every day,” she says. “But selling wine? No way. I would rather pick weeds and tend chickens.” ■



Naomi Brilliant and her son  
Justice on their farm in Sonoma.