

## The story behind Napa's new blockbuster winery: Promontory

By [Esther Mobley](#)

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Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle

IMAGE 1 OF 4

The Promontory winery in Napa Valley will be open to tastings.

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IMAGE 2 OF 4

Promontory winery in the Napa Valley.

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Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle

IMAGE 3 OF 4

Promontory Estate in the Napa Valley will be open for tastings.

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IMAGE 4 OF 4

Artwork in the winery shows the rock formations present in the Promontory vineyard soils.

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Once upon a time, Bill Harlan raced motorcycles, docked a schooner on seven continents and played professional poker. Now, he buys unwieldy swaths of Napa Valley wilderness.

Same sensation of thrill seeking, perhaps; different resource set.

Harlan rests in a singular sort of Napa Valley regency. With his fortune first built on the real estate firm Pacific Union, Harlan's crown is now studded with the jewels of Harlan Estate and Bond wineries, and Meadowood resort with its three-star Michelin restaurant. At 76, he is about to officially unveil his latest — and presumably, last — wine estate, Promontory.

Developing Promontory, as both a vineyard property and a wine brand, might from the outside look like a thrill seeker's gamble. In the foothills of Mount Veeder, straddling Oakville and Yountville's borderlands, the vineyard doesn't fall within the boundaries of any AVA. Two seismic fault lines bisect it. Averaging a 40 percent slope, it's nearly too precipitous for cultivation. Scarcely 10 percent of the 840-acre territory is plantable.

This unique geography, and its quality of feral grandeur, has prompted many wine pundits to already declare Promontory Harlan's crowning achievement: It "has set the wine world abuzz with anticipation," [wrote Karen MacNeil](#) in 2014. It reimagines "the classic Napa Cabs of the '70s," by [Jay McInerney's estimation](#). Bill Harlan himself has told several writers that the wine from the Promontory vineyard will fill in Napa's "missing shade of red" — a provocatively immodest goal.

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But Promontory also represents the Harlan family's attempt to be more accessible — a relative term, granted, when you're in Napa, and when you're a Harlan.

So unlike Harlan Estate, famously shuttered to the public, the Promontory winery will be open for tastings. Promontory will actually have wine for sale at the winery, unlike Harlan Estate and Bond, which sell wine only through their allocated mailing lists. And whereas Harlan Estate's current release sells for \$850 a bottle, Promontory's is \$450.

Allowing customers to visit your winery hardly sounds like a radical innovation. But Harlan Estate, considered one of [Napa's "cult Cabernets,"](#) first gained fame in the nineties not only for its wine quality — its ripe, generous, concentrated wines helped define a new era of wine style — but also for its astronomical prices, for the wines' scarcity and for the estate's all-around secrecy. It wasn't just that you couldn't visit the winery. Even if you had the money, you couldn't buy the wines.

Promontory's tasting appointments, in limited supply, cost \$200 a person. But they're also instituting a modified, discounted group session, likely \$50, on Saturdays at 8 a.m. That discount is a nod, they say, to Bill Harlan's own frugal college student days in the 1960s, when he enjoyed tastings at Napa wineries, then all free. It also seems designed to discourage the rowdier, louder tourist crowds that tend to arrive at wineries much later in the day.

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“While in today’s era the free program isn’t quite feasible, we wanted to be able to engage younger folks at an earlier stage of their wine development,” Will Harlan, Bill’s son, says. “If they’re genuinely curious ... and willing to wake up a bit early, we feel it would be really important to be able to offer an experience at a price that’s attainable.”



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle  
Will Harlan, Bill Harlan's son, at Promontory Estate winery in Napa.

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Bill Harlan likes to talk about having a “200-year plan” for his businesses. Phase one is securing a successor. That’s how 29-year-old Will has come to play such a large role in Promontory, and Cory Empting — the 36-year-old winemaker for Harlan Estate and Bond under longtime director of winegrowing Bob Levy — to assume the new winery’s director position.

Promontory has been in the making Will’s entire life; the 200-year plan doesn’t move quickly. Bill Harlan had had his eye on the Promontory property since he’d hiked there in 1984, while he was planting Harlan Estate nearby. It wasn’t until 2008 that he was able to begin buying the land, which he acquired in three parcels.

Only someone with Harlan-level resources, perhaps, could endeavor to harness Promontory’s ferocity. Though just a quarter-mile south as the crow flies from Harlan Estate, in the Oakville hillsides, and a scant mile from the French Laundry, it feels a world away from both. “These aren’t the soft rolling hills of Harlan Estate,” Empting says. Instead, Promontory — whose two seismic fault lines give it three distinct soil series, including a highly heterogeneous metamorphic pocket — is jagged, steep, rocky. Empting believes the wines reflect this landscape. “They scream purity and wildness,” he says.

OK, but not *too* wild. When the Harlans first bought the property, it needed a lot of work: Cut-down trees had been dumped negligently; erosion was rampant; the roads were getting washed out. The soil, formerly treated with harsh herbicides and acidulated fertilizers, was infirm.

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Empting's prescription: "do-nothing farming," the agrarian philosophy prescribed by Masanobu Fukuoka in his treatise "The One-Straw Revolution." (Sometimes called "natural farming," it shares many goals with biodynamic agriculture, but deviates from it in practices and spiritual principles.) Promontory's soil variation and tendency toward compaction, Empting says, demanded a novel approach. And though Harlan Estate and the Bond properties are farmed organically, the do-nothing imperatives — no tilling, no soil ripping, no weeding — have inspired changes there, too. (The company does not pursue sustainability certifications.)



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle

The view from Promontory Estate, nestled in the hillsides of Oakville Grade.

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The first year the Harlans had Promontory, 2008, they made wine from the vineyard but weren't satisfied with it. They will never sell it. Ever since, vineyard manager Mary Maher has been chipping away piecemeal at restoring Promontory, replanting underperforming vines block by block. "I'm gonna be in my 70s before our replanting program comes to completion," the younger Harlan says.

The only remnants of infrastructure on the 840 acres are an abandoned creekside cabin and the ruins of a vestigial Prohibition-era bootlegging still. In order to keep Promontory wild, the Harlans decided not to build a winery there, which would have required complicated permits, not to mention paved roads.

Instead, Harlan purchased an existing winery on Oakville Grade, 300 yards north of Harlan Estate. The building has had several lives before — as Vichon, in the early eighties, later as the Cal-Ital project La Famiglia di Robert Mondavi, most recently as Diamond Oaks — and as such, was grandfathered into some now-unheard-of use permits. For instance, they can serve full meals there and hold nighttime events, activities permitted to few Napa wineries anymore. (The culinary program, likely to involve Meadowood chef Christopher Kostow and a hearty, family-style midday meal, won't debut until next year.)

"We have a certain freedom," Will Harlan says.

The wineries' proximity may look to some like the equivalent of buying a vacation house on the same block as your home. Indeed, the physical winery looks much like its Harlan Estate counterpart; both were designed by Howard Backen, Napa Valley's architect to the stars. But Promontory is Howard Backen Contemporary:

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“almost industrial,” in Will Harlan’s words, incorporating more concrete, steel and glass than the other, which is dominated by stone and redwood. Construction, begun in 2012, finished in May.

In this kingdom of bottomless resources, the winery has been outfitted with equipment designed to complement the Promontory vineyard’s rustic wildness — though calling anything the Harlans do “rustic” would be a stretch for most people. The hallmark of the apparatus: After the standard nine to twelve months of aging in French oak barrels, the Promontory Cabernets are blended and put into Stockinger Austrian oak casks.



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle  
Concrete and oak fermentation tanks at Promontory Estate.

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Austrian oak? “It’s a big departure,” Empting concedes. “But what was working at Harlan and Bond” — all sweet, toasty French wood — “wasn’t working here.” Bill Harlan wasn’t immediately on board with the idea, especially since they initially had to import the casks from the cooperage themselves, but Empting prevailed.

Similar to the Austrian and German vessels that Inglenook used in the old days, the casks help realize the retrograde personality of the Promontory wines. Though still rich and driven by fruit, these wines are a little quieter, wearing a little bit less of the opulent polish of the Harlan Estate powerhouses.

That shift is simply a reflection of the vineyard’s personality, Empting insists. But it’s hard not to read into it, too, a sign of the times — a concession to the terms of restraint that have crept into the California Cabernet conversation over the last decade. That conversation has often targeted benchmarks of hedonism that came of age in the nineties and early aughts, like Harlan Estate.

Empting himself engages in that conversation: “There’s a sweetness to Napa fruit already. And to reinforce that doesn’t seem intuitive.”

Likewise, the decision to open Promontory to the public feels like an acknowledgment that luxury branding is now better served in transparency than in secrecy. Harlan Estate, lavish secluded wine palace never intended for public eyes, thrived on mystery, but building a wine business — or any business — in 2017 demands face-to-face connection. “We know how important it is to have direct relationships with people,” Will Harlan says.

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Empting agrees: “It seemed like it was worth fostering those relationships, and not being so exclusive.” He pauses. “I say this, but I was probably the biggest advocate at first for not having visitors.”

It doesn't take a cynic to see the irony in calling a \$200 tasting appointment “accessible.” And then again, accessibility by that standard is not what the Harlans are going for. It's rather the posture of openness — a controlled transparency.

That the Promontory vineyard can produce an original wine, not merely a copy of Harlan Estate, testifies to the character of Napa Valley land — that two vineyards separated by a mere quarter-mile, even when handled by the same people, can turn out meaningfully different wines.

But with the Harlans it's never just about a patch of dirt. It's about establishing institutions. Is Promontory the institution meaningfully different from Harlan Estate?

Will a \$200 tasting appointment help the wines reach a new audience? Will the wineries, in the end, appear as twins, steel and concrete notwithstanding? In the nineties, Harlan Estate defined the era, introducing a new wine style, stoking a new level of demand for Napa Valley wines. Will Promontory sound that same, comfortable horn?

Or will it have something new to say?

**If you go**

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Visits to Promontory will begin with a glass of Dom Pérignon Champagne — likely one of their experimentally aged cuvees, P2 and P3 — since, after all, Promontory produces only red wine. Each party will have its own individual host, who will use a map to orient guests to the Promontory vineyard. (They won't visit the vineyard.) A tour of the winery follows, culminating in a cask sample tasting — a young wine not yet bottled — while standing among the Stockinger oak casks. Finally, they'll retire to a private room, where the host will guide guests through tastings of a few different vintages, including the upcoming release and a library selection. Wine may be purchased. (Longtime mailing-list customers of Promontory, Harlan Estate and Bond may expect an enhanced itinerary.)

To request an appointment, email [visit@promontory.wine](mailto:visit@promontory.wine) or call (707) 963-2206. Appointments offered 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily, \$200 per person.



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