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Dramatic Remodels

PHOTO BY MARS LASAR

RISING *from the* ASHES

DESTROYED BY THE 2017 WILDFIRES IN NAPA VALLEY,
SIGNORELLO MAKES A TRIUMPHANT RETURN.

BY EMILY MANGINI

To say that mother nature, and humanity, have lobbed some real grenades at Ray Signorello, Jr., would be an understatement. The second-generation leader of Signorello Estate has been through earthquakes, fires (wild and arson-set), and a police shootout. As a young man, he lost both parents to cancer within three years. And, he was in New York City on September 11.

As if all of that wasn't enough for one lifetime, on October 8, 2017, Signorello Estate's winery burned to the ground. The only winery to burn, it became the industry's poster child for the wind-whipped wildfires that ravaged Napa Valley and Northern California.

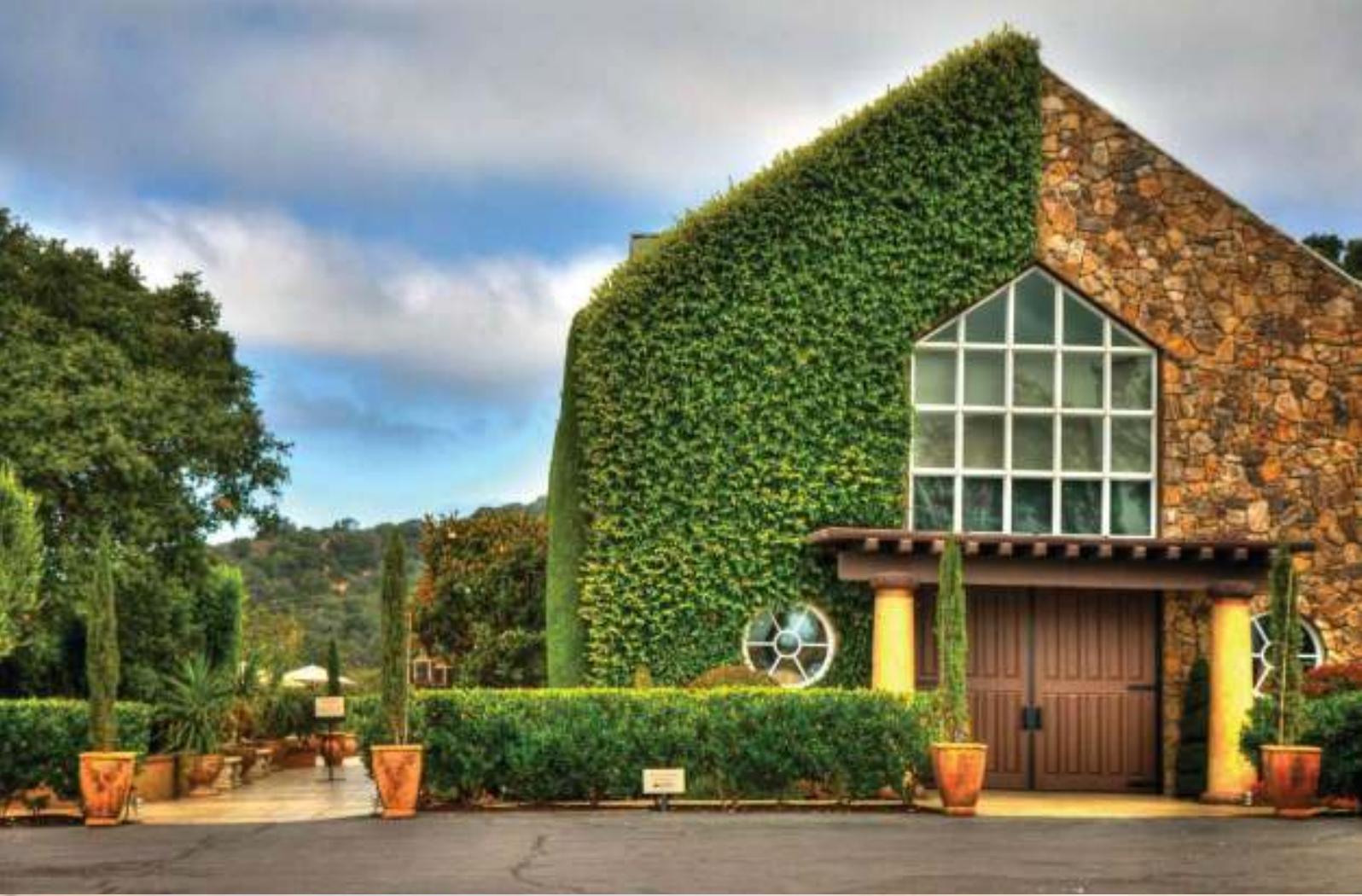
So, it'd be fair if Signorello, 55, was angry, maybe even cynical. But he's not. He's an optimist, a connoisseur of the silver lining, a person whose peers describe him as "calm."

This shone through when Signorello, followed by the nation's news crews, was finally allowed back onto the winery property. His first comment was, "What's important is that no one was hurt." He then toe-kicked some ash and declared, "We will rebuild."

And it's that spirit that makes the newest chapter not just one of gratitude and hope, but of a phoenix rising from the ashes waving a flag woven of silver linings. Because what was lost—the Italian villa that housed the hospitality center, the wine lab, and the Signorello family residence—can be rebuilt.

Mercifully, what wasn't lost were the things that can't be rebuilt. The crush pads and stainless steel tanks, maybe 30-feet from the villa and filled with just-harvested grapes,







were unscathed. The barrel building housing the 2016 reds and the freshly-pressed 2017 whites survived without even a scorch mark. The shed covering the beloved, baby yellow, 1955 Cadillac Coupe de Ville once owned by the estate's late founding patriarch, Ray Signorello, Sr., was still standing. And that building, his son notes, could've gone up in flames with a "single match."

The vineyards were also safe. Obviously, this is important for any winery, but for Signorello, those vines are a special part of his family history.

Purchased in the 1970s, the virgin land had been earmarked for retirement for Ray Signorello, Sr., and his wife, Hope. The land was planted with grapes for selling only; there was never an intention to make wine. It wasn't until the mid-1980s that the younger Signorello and his dad started playing around, making wine with extra grapes. When Robert Parker, the famed San Francisco wine critic, bestowed early praise, father and son knew they were onto something.

What followed was establishing Signorello Estate as a producer of premier, food-friendly estate wines made from aged vines, even at the sacrifice of output and profit. "I use the analogy that [the vines] are like people," Signorello shares. "When you're young, you're exuberant, but you don't have a lot of depth and complexity. When you're old, you don't have a lot of exuberance, but you have a lot of complexity. So our production is extremely low, but the wines coming off of those old vines, we think, are much better."

This commitment is perfectly illustrated by the Hope's Cuvee Chardonnay and Padrone Cabernet Sauvignon. Made in honor of Signorello's late parents, the Hope's Cuvee Chardonnay is made from some of the oldest, if not *the* oldest, chardonnay vines in California. This is thanks to another silver-lined anecdote. When the Signorellos were first planting their vines, they couldn't get their hands on the then popular AxR#1 rootstock, the one supposedly immune to the vine-killing Phylloxera. Then, in the early '80s, vineyards throughout California "began to succumb to attack" by the stock-eating insects. As winemakers were forced to pull up their vineyards, the Signorellos' stayed rooted. Those surviving chardonnay grapes make the Hope's Cuvee.

As for the Padrone Cabernet Sauvignon, named in honor of the estate's original patriarch, it's only made from harvests that yield grapes distinctly worthy of



the namesake label. That means if there is a year when all the cabernet grapes are wonderful, but there isn't a standout Padrone-worthy block, there will be no Padrone that year.

A lot about Signorello Estate comes back to those complex old vines, which makes what happened that fall night in 2017 so incredible. The vineyards created a firebreak. The only way the fire got to the building was through a gap in the vineyards encircling it. The fire found, and took full advantage of, the estate's sliver-like achilles heel.

Signorello wasn't in Napa the night of the fire, but when the calls started coming from Pierre Birebent, the Signorello winemaker of 20 years, he knew it was the real deal. "He'd call every 10 minutes," Signorello recalls. "He'd tell me, the fire is at the next ridgeline over, now it's on the next property over, it's at the corner of our property." The last call from Birebent, Signorello says, was him crying. "It's gone," he told me.

But again, this isn't a story about loss. "The silver lining is that we get to do this again," Signorello says, "build something different, modern, and new." For now, tastings are being hosted in an elegant trailer with panoramic views of the valley. But by spring 2021, where an Italian villa once stood will be a sleek, mid-century-inspired building. When asked about the distinct design departure, Signorello explained, "We're trying to create something that will stand the test of time." He then added, with a laugh, "And hopefully my girls one day will be passionate enough to take over, and they won't feel embarrassed by what Daddy built."

The new building will provide ample space for hosting and winemaking. "We're going with the old European way—we want to sit down with people around the table, spend a couple of hours with them, and really give that full hosted experience." There will also be electric carts to take people around the vineyards, so guests can get up close to see the property. And speaking of cars, there will be a special glassed-in room for his dad's Coupe de Ville. "He loved that car, so it's a nice way of keeping him with us."

Still, there is more to the new building than just a fresh, new aesthetic. "You know, when you're in the business for 30 or 40 years, you learn what you need," Signorello reflects. "This is our opportunity to add those elements." That means more space and a better layout; a gravity-fed winery, a fermentation cellar, and caves for barrel storage, all elements that will improve the winemaking process. But there's another vital aspect about the stone, glass, and steel building with its caves and cellars. "They don't burn," Signorello chuckles. ♦





