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FATHER & SON A ZINFANDEL LEGACY IN SONOMA

JOEL PETERSON AND
MORGAN TWAIN-PETERSON
IN BEDROCK VINEYARD

WINE COUNTRY TRAVEL
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ZINFANDEL

— / *from* / —

Father

— / *to* / —

Son

JOEL PETERSON and MORGAN TWAIN-PETERSON
are dedicated to California's signature red grape

BY TIM FISH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TAI POWER SEEFF

Joel Peterson (right) and Morgan Twain-Peterson, shown in the Bedrock Vineyard, make diverse styles of Zinfandel but both believe in the glory and preservation of old vines.



One of Morgan Twain-Peterson's earliest memories is of riding his bike to the Sonoma winery his dad, Joel Peterson, leased for his Ravenswood brand in the mid-1980s. Morgan, in grade school then, grew up in that winery, climbing on stacks of barrels like a jungle gym. ● Peterson's landlord was grape-grower Angelo Sangiacomo, whose office was just across a vineyard from the winery. Morgan hung out with Angelo and his boys. One day when he was 5 years old, Morgan made Angelo a business proposition. The lad had 10,000 lira given to him by his parents, left over from a trip to Italy. "I thought it was a fortune at the time but it was worth, like, \$10," Twain-Peterson says now, laughing. He offered the lira to Angelo in exchange for Pinot Noir grapes. He wanted to make wine.

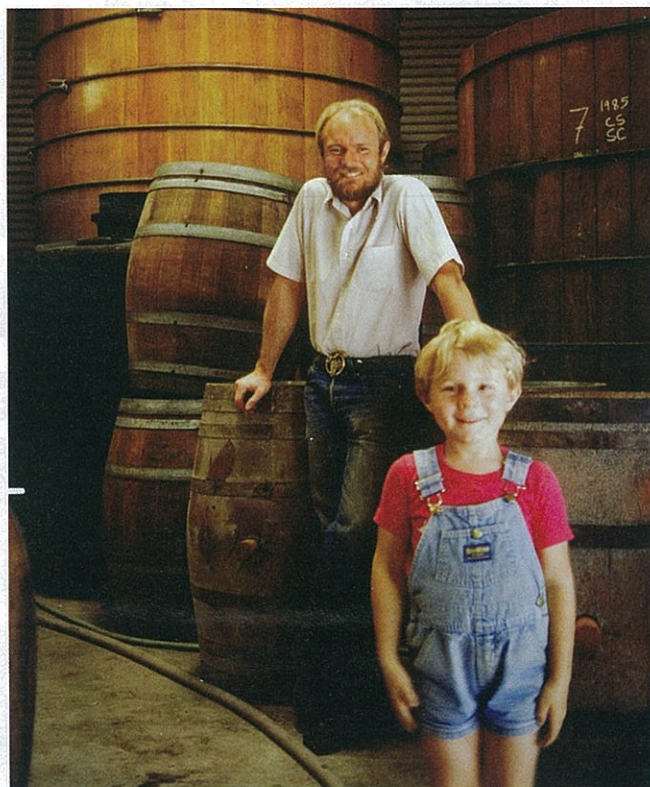
Twain-Peterson's early desire to be a winemaker has become part of the lore of the family, of Ravenswood and of his own winery, Bedrock. He smiles when asked about his memories of that time and concedes he's vague on details. "My dad," he says wryly, "is very good at creating narratives."

Peterson, 72, and Twain-Peterson, 38, make for a distinctive narrative. Both are native Californians and consummate storytellers. Both are well-educated but drawn to a life that leaves dirt under their nails. Each makes Zinfandel and Zin-based blends from vineyards that are 75 to 100 years old or more.

Both winemakers have shown impressive results. Over the years, 32 Ravenswood Zins have earned outstanding scores of 90 or more points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, while 62 of Bedrock's Zins have received 90-plus scores across 12 vintages. More importantly, both father and son have influenced how California Zinfandel is grown, made and marketed, Peterson for 40 years and Twain-Peterson in the past decade.

"Joel's influence on Zinfandel is immeasurable," says Mike Officer, who specializes in Zinfandel at his winery, Carlisle. Among contemporary California winemakers, only Paul Draper of Ridge was an earlier advocate for Zinfandel than Peterson. Now retired, Draper says of his old friend, "Joel has done more to promote Zinfandel in America than any other individual."

Not only is Twain-Peterson following in his father's footsteps, the two are best friends; Morgan has even asked Joel to be best man at his wedding this summer. Tegan Passalacqua, winemaker at Turley Wine Cellars, another Zin specialist, describes father and son this way: "I don't think Morgan could have started Bedrock without Joel's help, but I see a rejuvenation of Joel as a person and a winemaker coming from Morgan. They're both extremely intelligent and very independent people and clearly, in my opinion, can't exist without each other."



Morgan Twain-Peterson (above circa 1986) grew up playing in the space where his father, Joel Peterson (background), made his Ravenswood wines.

Bedrock Vineyard, which Joel purchased in 2004, is situated in a sweet spot for Zinfandel in Sonoma Valley, a neighborhood it shares with distinguished and historic Zinfandel vineyards such as Old Hill and Monte Rosso (although the latter is prized for Cabernet too). Drivers on Highway 12 between Kenwood and Sonoma can catch a glimpse of Bedrock, but the vineyard is larger than it appears from the road, comprising 150 acres of meandering vines on a rolling bench of land.

The heart of the vineyard, the *crème de la crème*, is the 33 original acres that have produced wines for 130 years. The Petersons DNA-tested and mapped all 16,279 of the oldest vines, and seem to know that section by the inch. Zinfandel is the dominant grape but there are nearly 30 other varieties planted, including

Carignane, Mourvèdre and Petite Sirah plus obscure grapes such as Trousseau Noir, Mondeuse and even Mission. Some vines could not be genetically identified.

It's precisely the sort of vineyard that Peterson has championed from the beginning of his career. "Historically, they speak to me because there has been actually somebody before me who cared about them," he explains. "So I see myself as pretty much a steward for these vineyards."

Peterson had no intention of buying Bedrock when the owners approached him. But if he didn't, they intended to replant it to Cabernet Sauvignon. "I pitched a fit," Peterson says. "That pissed me off, because the grapes were great."

Vines don't survive 130 years by sheer luck. They were preserved because they produced wines of distinction. One reason is the soil: Tuscan Red Hill, a cobbly loam that washed down from nearby Mt. Veeder millions of years ago. Still, the oldest vines had grown tired and malnourished and it was a long process revitalizing them, helped by compost, cover crops like bell beans, and rye grass.

All that work is evident in the vineyard's modern generation

of wines. Twain-Peterson's 2017 Bedrock Heritage Sonoma Valley combines finesse with power, with blackberry, fruitcake spice and orange zest accents. Once & Future Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Bedrock Vineyard 2016 reveals Peterson's desire for Zins built to age, with a taut backbone framed by currant, fresh earth and spice flavors.

Other top producers, including Robert Biale and Limerick Lane, also bottle vineyard-designated Bedrocks. Carlisle's Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Bedrock Vineyard 2016 shows verve and refinement, with black cherry, brown baking spice and stony loam accents, while Turley's Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Bedrock Vineyard 2016 is deeply layered with hints of blackberry, clove and orange zest.

All these wines share a common thread: a distinctive and eclectic personality, along with intensity and backbone. But the two that are least alike stylistically are the father's and the son's. Once & Future shows Peterson's trademark claret style and cellar-worthy structure, complex without being showy. Bedrock has a similar core of structure but layers on more richness, detail and bolder fruit. The differences are intentional, like two chefs tinkering with the same recipe.

"Conflict, tension or competition? Absolutely none that I have ever seen," Officer says. "They get along famously. When Joel speaks about Morgan, he positively beams. And Morgan seems to have great respect and admiration for his father and all he has accomplished."

There's a quote Peterson is fond of: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards" (Kierkegaard). When Peterson looks back, he sees he has covered a lot of ground, first building Ravenswood into one of California's most respected wineries, then, in 2001, selling it to giant Constellation Brands (who sold it to E.&J. Gallo in April of this year). Today, his involvement in Ravenswood is minimal, tasting with the winemakers occasionally.

"I had been doing a large winery for a long time and it was never really where I wanted to be," Peterson says, describing his gradual departure from Ravenswood over the past three years. "It was amazing and it was very lucrative, but that's a young person's game."



A dinner party brings together family and friends: (clockwise from top) Peterson with his wife, Madeleine Deininger; Twain-Peterson and fiancée Kayte Nelsen; and Chris Cottrell, Twain-Peterson's partner in the Bedrock label.

Peterson was 29 when he made his first wine, in 1976. "The early days of Ravenswood probably included a lot of magical thinking," he says, laughing. He sits at the kitchen table of the home he shares with Madeleine Deininger, his wife of 20-plus years, which overlooks the village of Sonoma. Lunch is made from scratch, unfussy but refined—mushroom soup, avocado on baguette toast and a salad.

There was a lot of good food and wine in the house when Peterson was growing up in Point Richmond, across the bay from San Francisco. Both his parents were chemists. His mother, Frances, worked as a nuclear chemist on the Manhattan Project before Joel was born; his father, Walter, was a physical chemist specializing in high-temperature lubricants. "Mom grew really appalled by it all," Peterson says of her work on the atomic bomb. When Joel was born, Frances quit her job and stayed home, and taught herself to cook.



Bedrock and Once & Future share a no-frills winery space in an industrial park on the outskirts of Sonoma; the tasting room is situated downtown. From left: Cellarhand Seph Scheid, viticulturist Jake Neustadt, Twain-Peterson, Chris Cottrell, cellar master Luke Nio, Peterson, vineyard manager Sarah Geisse and assistant winemaker Cody Rasmusen.

Walter loved wine and was instrumental in starting what is now the San Francisco Vintners Club.

Like most American enophiles in the 1950s and '60s, the Petersons were drinking European wines but starting to explore California wines. Joel was 10 when his dad let him participate in a tasting, although Walter warned: "Shut up and spit!" Through the tasting group, Joel was introduced to many of the people who shaped wine appreciation in Northern California: wine-and-food connoisseur Narsai David, collector and grower Barney Rhodes, wine merchant Jerry Draper and winemaker Joseph Swan.

After graduating with a degree in microbiology from Oregon State University in 1969, Joel did medical research in San Francisco. On the side, he was a wine writer and consultant. On the weekends and during harvests, he helped Joe Swan at his Russian

River Valley winery. "I learned a lot about the nuts and bolts of winemaking from Joe: how to prune a grapevine, which side of the barrel is up, all that stuff," Peterson recalls.

In 1976, in what he calls "a true act of hubris," Peterson decided to make his own wine. He settled on Zin immediately. "I was tasting these amazing Zinfandels that Joe Swan was making. Joe made Zinfandel the way he made Pinot Noir, and lo and behold the Zinfandel said, 'Hey, I like this.'"

Peterson had no idea how he was going to pay for the project, let alone sell the wine, but he managed to scrape together money to buy grapes and a few barrels. Two vineyard-designated wines were produced that first vintage—Polsen and Vogensen, both from Sonoma County. Peterson was in his hippy days at the time, with hair down to his shoulders and his only transportation a Cal-Trans



truck held together with spare parts. “After I made the wine,” Peterson says, “I realized I didn’t have enough money to bottle it.” His father’s friend Reed Foster stepped in and put together a limited partnership. They called the venture Ravenswood Winery.

“They made me a 51 percent partner in some pretty fancy business work. It was very generous on their part,” Peterson says.

As part of the deal, Foster agreed to oversee the business side of Ravenswood, while Joel made the wine. The partnership came just in time, since the ’76 wines had been in the barrel three years. The retail price when they were released was \$7.50. “People complained bitterly. ‘Zinfandel for \$7.50? Are you crazy?’” Peterson says.

Ravenswood struggled for years, growing slowly until Foster came to Peterson one day in 1983 to tell him the partnership couldn’t keep dumping money into the winery. “You need to come up with a cash-flow wine,” Foster said. “Or we won’t be here in a year.”

Peterson went into the cellar and culled 1,000 cases from odds

and ends to make the first “Vintners Blend Zinfandel.” Released in 1985 for a bargain \$10, it promptly sold out. “So I made another batch, and one thing led to another,” Peterson says.

Ravenswood’s days as a boutique winery would wind down, as production expanded quickly through the late 1990s. As someone passionate about small-lot, old-vine Zins, Peterson had mixed feelings. “We had grown far bigger than I ever imagined we’d grow, or even wanted to grow,” he says. By 1999, his partners were older and looking for an exit strategy, but Peterson didn’t have the money to buy them out. The first solution—to take Ravenswood public—didn’t raise enough cash, so the partners decided to sell. “Dad was the only person on the board who voted against the sale,” Twain-Peterson recalls.

By the time Ravenswood sold to Constellation Brands in 2001, the winery was producing 400,000 cases. The sale price was \$148 million, and Peterson came away with \$39 million, but joining a large company brought complications. Though Peterson will argue the point, Ravenswood’s single-vineyard Zins—Teldeschi, Big River and others—struggled to maintain previous levels of quality.

“Joel doesn’t have to work a day in his life at this point,” Passalacqua says. And yet Peterson is not the sort of person to kick back, even at an age when most people have retired. Friends say the passion and success of Morgan has revitalized Joel.

“If I’m lucky I have another 10 or 12 good years left in me,” says Peterson. What he really wanted was a 3,000- to 4,000-case winery that allowed him to be hands on, so in 2014, he started Once & Future, sharing a space with Bedrock in a Sonoma warehouse. “I loved the smells. I loved the texture. I loved the feel. I loved the sweat,” he explains. “It was real work, and real work appeals to me. It feels good. It’s good for the soul. And it’s probably better for the wines at the end of the day.”

Just off Sonoma Plaza, secluded behind the storefronts of First Street East, Bedrock’s tasting room is hard to find. History was one of Twain-Peterson’s undergraduate degrees at Vassar, and when the General Joseph Hooker House became available in downtown Sonoma, the young vintner couldn’t resist. U.S. Army officer “Fighting Joe” Hooker, as they called him, built the house in the 1850s, about the same time he planted the original vines in what is now Bedrock Vineyard.

“We don’t have a lot of wine to sell, but it’s a nice way for us to have a curated tasting,” Twain-Peterson explains. The winery itself is situated in a warehouse in an industrial park, so Hooker House serves as the handsome public face. If it looks like a small museum inside, that’s intentional. The original land-grant map and photos of the Bedrock label’s current growers and vineyard managers, including Lee Hudson, Chuy Ordaz and John Teldeschi, hang on the wall.

In his office above the tasting room, Twain-Peterson says he never intended to be a professional winemaker, let alone make Zinfandel like his father. But wine was deeply integrated in his world, a pervasive part of growing up in Sonoma Valley, where many of his friends had family in the business. Back then, before the corporate footprint was so large, local wine families like the Sebastianis, Benzigers and Bundschus were the soul of the valley.

Attending a private Catholic high school in nearby Napa, Twain-Peterson got to know the wine families there, as well. “There were

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—Joel Peterson

so many wine kids at that school. We had Mondavis, Stelznern and Altamuras. We would have parties and everyone would grab wine from their parents,” Twain-Peterson says. When the dean of the school busted one party, the friends played innocent: They didn’t know who brought the wine, they explained, “but they certainly had good taste.” Twain-Peterson laughs at the memory.

After graduation in 1999, Twain-Peterson took off for the East Coast. “I had a very starry idea of football games in the fall and turning foliage and all that stuff,” he says. He envisioned a life in academia and studied political science as well as history. That was followed by Columbia University, where he received a masters in American Studies in 2005.

But even then, wine continued to be a big part of his life. He worked at wineshops near the universities, and continued to make his childhood wine, dubbed *Vino Bambino*, with his father until 2001. During the summer after high school, when Twain-Peterson was working at Chelsea Wine Vault in New York, he talked the owner into letting him stage a tasting. “I invited all the top sommeliers in the city, and lo’ and behold they all came,” he says. The tiny production was bought by restaurants including Craft, Gramercy Tavern and Aureole.

Twain-Peterson was still in college when Ravenswood was sold. Life changed. He recalls his friend and current business partner Chris Cottrell, whom he met in New York in 2004, telling him that the best thing about the sale was that it came when Twain-Peterson was already halfway through college.

“I was never raised around a lot of money, so I had an additional sort of respect about how rare something like that is,” muses Twain-Peterson. “When I was growing up, dad was working multiple jobs and on the road all the time, working his ass off for this thing that he had created and really loved.”

After college, and increasingly disillusioned with a life in academia, Twain-Peterson returned to Sonoma. He began studying for the Master of Wine program (which he completed in 2018), and as much as he appreciated his hometown wines, he also became fascinated with wines from around the world, particularly esoteric regions such as Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Zinfandel, he wasn’t so sure about. At least at first.

“I must admit I was snobbish about it at some points because it was seen as this sweet, high-alcohol, boozy, usually heavily oaked style,” he concedes today. “Zinfandel had a really crummy reputation, particularly where I was coming from: New York, Chicago and San Francisco. Sommeliers literally wouldn’t even taste it.”

And he couldn’t ignore the irony that top California restaurants built a narrative around local farm and foods partnerships yet poured Trousseau from France’s Jura region with their Sonoma-raised lamb. “Somehow the narrative that applied to food didn’t apply to the oldest vines in the state of California—what truly was our greatest bit of heritage here,” Twain-Peterson says.

But when he told his father he wanted to go into the wine business, dad was blunt. “I said, ‘Yeah, we made wine together for a long time but you’re not really qualified to be in the wine business,’” says Peterson. Still, Peterson put his son on the cellar crew at Ravenswood during crush, to see if he survived. “They gave him the really hard, kind of brain-deadening jobs,” Peterson recalls, chuckling.

Undaunted, Twain-Peterson worked the 2006 crush at Tintara winery in Australia, then traveled to Europe later that year to work harvest at Château Lynch-Bages. “It was the cushiest harvest I ever

ALL ZIN THE FAMILY

The chart below features recent bottlings from Morgan Twain-Peterson’s Bedrock label and Joel Peterson’s Once & Future label, plus standout bottlings from Peterson’s tenure at Ravenswood. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews using the online Wine Ratings search.

SELECTED RECENT RELEASES FROM BEDROCK

score	wine	release price	cases
95	The Bedrock Heritage Sonoma Valley 2017	\$45	750
94	Evangelho Vineyard Heritage Contra Costa County 2017	\$36	600
94	Papera Ranch Heritage Russian River Valley 2017	\$46	250
93	Dolinsek Ranch Heritage Russian River Valley 2017	\$45	200
93	Lorenzo’s Heritage Dry Creek Valley 2017	\$46	300
93	Zinfandel California Old Vine 2017	\$25	4,000

SELECTED RECENT RELEASES FROM ONCE & FUTURE

score	wine	release price	cases
93	Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Teldeschi Vineyard Frank’s Block 2017	\$50	252
92	Zinfandel Contra Costa County Oakley Road Vineyard 2017	\$50	226
92	Zinfandel Russian River Valley Sodini Vineyard 2017	\$50	200
88	Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Bedrock Vineyard 2017	\$50	226

SELECTED HISTORIC RELEASES FROM RAVENSWOOD

score	wine	release price	cases
92	Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Old Hill 1986	\$13	NA
92	Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Cooke 1990	\$16	600
91	Zinfandel Napa Valley Dickerson 1992	\$18	1,297
90	Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Monte Rosso 1994	\$20	2,660
90	Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Teldeschi Single Vineyard 2012	\$37	4,032



Twain-Peterson tickles the ivories at his father's home. Trained in the Suzuki method throughout his childhood, he now plays a few times a week for relaxation.

worked," he says. "They truly do enforce a 37-hour work week and you have three-bottle lunches."

He settled back in Sonoma in the winter of 2006 and was ready to make his first Bedrock wine. "I had no plans to make Zinfandel. My joke was that dad had all the best Zinfandel vineyards locked down already," he says.

So Twain-Peterson decided to focus on the vineyard, not the variety. "I thought it was a way to recast the narrative of Zinfandel," he explains. "Sort of take it off the front of the label and tell the story about this vineyard that has all these other crazy varieties in it. That allowed us to get into the door with a lot of people who were skeptical of Zin."

Bedrock's other wine focus is Syrah but the label also makes Sauvignon Blanc, a floral Rhône-style rosé called Ode to Lulu, and using purchased fruit, a zesty non-vintage red blend called Shebang. Bedrock's annual production is 12,000 cases, with another 8,000 to 10,000 cases of Shebang. "I didn't necessarily want to be seen as 'Zinfandel: the Next Generation,'" says Twain-Peterson. "I wanted to have my own unique trajectory."

Last year, Bedrock added the 100-year-old Evangelho Vineyard in Contra Costa County to its portfolio, buying 10 acres and assuming a long-term lease on the remaining 26. While growth isn't Twain-Peterson's focus, it's in his genes to preserve such a site.

On a visit to Bedrock Vineyard on a late-winter morning, the Mayacamas mountain range to the east is a shade of effervescent green following a series of rainstorms. On a picnic table by a pond, Peterson has opened five of his Once & Future Zins from 2016 and 2017, while his son is sharing a vertical of Bedrock's Bedrock Heritage blend, from 2011 to 2017. (The

2016 was *Wine Spectator's* No. 10 wine of the 2018 Top 100.)

Father and son are conspicuously related, although the son runs stockier. And while Peterson likes cowboy hats and is on his third Tesla, and Twain-Peterson is more a baseball cap and truck guy, both speak in a similar rhythm and share high-watt energy. Passions and opinions are in no shortage.

"You can have all the power you want in California, and actually knowing when to let up off the gas is the most important thing sometimes," Twain-Peterson says, grumbling about overripe and unbalanced wines that contributed to Zin's troubled reputation. "I think there's a big difference between picking at 14 or 14.5 percent real alcohol [versus] picking at 18 percent alcohol and watering it back to 14 percent. Unfortunately, [the latter] was far too common."

Taking the long view, Peterson remains concerned about the preservation of old vineyards. "The money in the wine business is not in vineyards. If I had to make a living from (Bedrock) vineyard, we'd be eating shoe leather," he says. "But as more wineries and vineyards get acquired by corporate interests, there will be fewer great grapes to go around. That's what makes Bedrock a good proposition for us, and which is why Morgan bought Evangelho."

Both men are hopeful the hard work of the past will remain the groundwork for the future. "He's probably doing the wines I should have done. He saw what I was doing and did it better," says the father about the son.

Twain-Peterson won't have any of that, stopping his dad: "Yeah but you spent most of the 1980s and 1990s convincing people Zinfandel wasn't pink!"

Peterson looks at his son and smiles, perhaps thinking what he would later put into words over lunch: "The beauty of selling Ravenswood was that I got to help Morgan." □