

The Dark Side of Napa

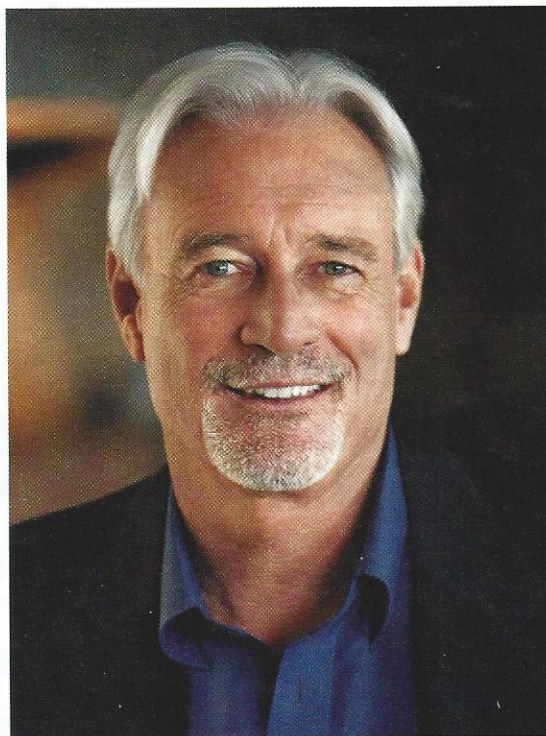
For thirty years, author James Conaway has been chronicling the saga of Napa Valley. The final entry in his Napa trilogy, *Napa at Last Light: America's Eden in an Age of Calamity* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), isn't really about wine or the Napa most people think of. But it is the talk of the valley, and the questions it raises are not going away.

In the American imagination, this picturesque region is a mecca for wine lovers. Beautiful vineyards line the country roads, tasting rooms abound, and eating and drinking don't get any better. Sure, Napa is congested, but that goes hand in hand with popularity. What highways or tourist attractions in California aren't these days? While irritating to locals, this congestion hardly discourages wine fanatics. Repeat customers keep coming back for the next show.

But something is eating at Conaway, and it's not traffic. What he's angry about is where Napa is headed and why it's headed there. The problems center on the politics that govern land use and the wealthy players who increasingly own much of the valley. By treating Napa as either a luxury playground or just another revenue source, the richest vintners threaten the very agricultural endeavors that made the region what it is today. At its most fundamental, wine is precision-farming that exploits *terroir*, not some exercise in personal brand-building or strategic move for global market share.

Conaway analyzes a few bitter disputes between wineries that want to expand and preservationists who resist development. He argues that for today's bigger wineries, planting new vineyards is in fact a stalking horse for development, bringing new roads and new buildings in their wake, along with large-scale earthmoving, increased demand for water and ever more traffic, generated by events not even related to wine.

In other words, under the cover of agriculture, these wineries are sacrificing nature to commerce. Among the chief offenders he accuses are Raymond's Jean-Charles Boisset, Schramsberg's Hugh



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Davies, and Kathryn and Craig Hall. Bill Harlan and the Wagner family of Caymus are also flagged for excess.

Conaway is well aware that Napa faces challenges. But he is more and more alarmed by how often agriculture takes a backseat to other commercial endeavors, as the power wielded by Big Money gets even bigger. Napa has long catered to the affluent, but, Conaway argues, tourism and real estate threaten to muscle out actual winegrowing.

The truth is that the paradise Conaway described in his first book on the valley, *Napa: The Story of an American Eden* (1990), has always been threatened by the sway that tourism, real estate and other business interests hold over the politics of land use. It was only by enacting the Agricultural Preserve, in 1968, that the county protected Napa from turning into Santa Clara, whose farmlands were effectively bulldozed into Silicon Valley.

Conaway's follow-up, *The Far Side of Eden: New Money, Old Land, and the Battle for Napa Valley* (2002), captured the transition from old Napa to new, as

the valley became a chic destination luring "lifestyle vintners" able to buy their way to social prominence. This created a snowball effect that saw tech billionaires, sports figures and Hollywood types glamorize winemaking, even if they never got their hands dirty. That's the backdrop for *Last Light*.

Conaway understands that real estate battles pitting neighbor against neighbor rarely play to a draw—and the land itself always loses. Once trees are felled for development, there's no turning back. Environmental concerns give way to what some consider progress, but that is often just a code for profit. Conaway blames both the distant corporate interests and the lifestyle vintners for bending the rules to their benefit. As plantable land in Napa becomes ever more scarce, those who have the means win out over those who don't. Local control becomes a thing of the past.

This is not a wine book, but it has a lot to say about the future of Napa as a wine region. Conaway does find some heroes in his story, particularly vintners Randy Dunn and Steve Matthiasson, and even as he paints a grim picture, he finds reasons for optimism. It's going to take some serious effort, but he believes Napa can survive. I hope he's right.

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