

DRINKS

# Directing a Revival

Francis Ford Coppola brings back legendary Napa estate Inglenook.

BY ELIN McCOY

► FILMMAKER FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA has spent almost 40 years following a wine dream—to restore the once-famous 19th-century Inglenook estate in the Napa Valley to greatness. The iconic, almost 1,700-acre property, which was founded in 1879 by wealthy Finnish fur trader Gustave Niebaum, was broken up in the 1960s. The long story of how Coppola, 74, acquired and reunited its several parts has all the twists and turns of a good movie script. He's been producing wine on what had been part of the Inglenook estate since 1977 but was able to purchase the trademark only two years ago. And last fall, he finally released his first wines with the name on the label.

As we settle onto a plush couch in the living room of the Victorian mansion Niebaum built on the Inglenook estate, the white-bearded Coppola launches into the complicated tale. Through the windows, we can see the sun shining on acres of cabernet sauvignon vines. "I put it all down to good fortune, to luck, that these pieces came around when I could afford them," Coppola says. "When I bought the first piece, in 1975, we were riding the financial success of *The Godfather*."

Coppola first learned to appreciate great Bordeaux 47 years ago in Paris, where he was sent to collaborate with Gore Vidal on the screenplay for *Is Paris Burning?* Bill Cosby introduced

him to Burgundy. "He didn't drink but poured Romanee-Conti for his friends at Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe casinos," Coppola says. "He taught me to play baccarat. One night, I bet \$500 and won \$30,000. I spent it all on 30 cases of Domaine de la Romanee-Conti."

Niebaum had modeled Inglenook in the style of a great Bordeaux chateau. The rare, amazingly complex 1941 Inglenook Cabernet is considered one of the greatest red wines ever made in California. In October, three bottles sold at a Zachys wine auction in New York for \$8,540 apiece.

By the mid-1960s, the estate was in financial trouble. Despite their quality, the wines didn't sell for enough money to pay the bills. John Daniel Jr., the grandnephew of Niebaum's wife, sold the historic winery, 94 acres (38 hectares) of vineyards and the brand name to Allied Grape Growers and United Vintners Inc. United was itself soon swallowed by Heublein Inc., which slapped the Inglenook name on cheap jug wines. In 1972, Daniel's widow, Betty, put the mansion and the remaining 1,560 acres on the market.

"We were looking for a small summer cottage in the Napa Valley—maybe on

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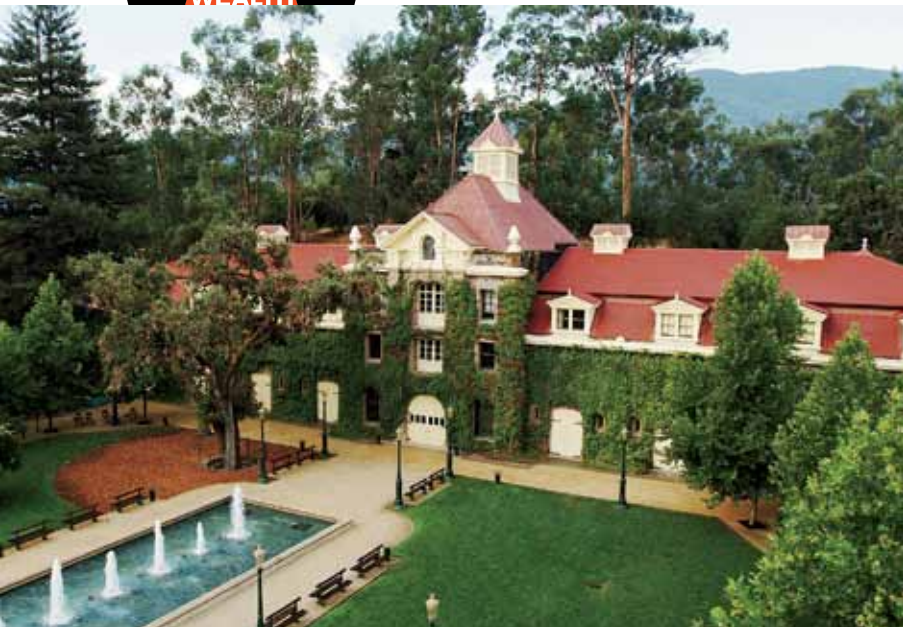


Before he bought the **Inglenook estate**, opposite top, **Francis Ford Coppola**, opposite bottom, was looking for 'a small summer cottage with an acre of grapes.' Above, the first vintage of Coppola's **Inglenook Cask Cabernet**.

a lake—with an acre of grapes," Coppola recalls. "I thought we could make some wine the way my grandfather did in his basement in a Bronx tenement." A real estate agent drove him and his wife, Eleanor, to see Niebaum's mansion. "We thought it was beautiful," Coppola says. On a whim, they put in a bid for the house and land. They lost out, but when the property came back on the block in 1975, they grabbed it, for \$1.6 million. "When Robert Mondavi stopped by, he told me I'd just bought the jewel of the Napa Valley and I could make wine as good as any in the world here," he says. "That's when I really started getting interested."

Coppola borrowed money to buy winemaking equipment and installed it in an outbuilding. The family stomped





The front of the  
Inglenook winery

the grapes by foot for their first vintage, 1977. “There’s a picture of us, but the wine got put somewhere,” he says, his face crinkling into a smile. “Someday, we’ll find it.” They named the estate Niebaum-Coppola, hired a winemaker and, the following year, released a rich, powerful, oaky, good-but-not-great cabernet blend called Rubicon.

“Then I almost lost everything,” Coppola says. He’d gone into debt with his 1979 epic film, *Apocalypse Now*, and the movie he made to bail himself out, *One From the Heart*, was a box office disaster. “I spent ages 40 to 50 paying off \$21 million to Chase Manhattan Bank.”

Meanwhile, another portion of the original Inglenook estate, the ivy-covered winery and the 94 acres of key vineyards, had bounced from one corporate owner to another. Coppola wanted it. Luck was with him again in 1995, when he heard rumors that it might be

for sale. Flush from the success of *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, Coppola bought the winery and acreage from Canandaigua Wine Co. for \$12 million and threw a party to celebrate.

In 2002, he paid more than \$30 million for the neighboring J.J. Cohn Estate vineyard, whose grapes had gone into the 1941 Inglenook.

Coppola moved winemaking to the 39,000-square-foot (3,600-square-meter) Inglenook winery and filled it with movie memorabilia, including Vito Corleone’s desk from *The Godfather*. That and a huge shop with Coppola’s lines of pasta and less expensive wines drew 2,000 visitors on weekends. He began to think he was cheapening the brand. “I became depressed,” he says. “I owned an icon of the Napa Valley and wanted to treat it seriously.” He moved the commercial wines and memorabilia to a new Sonoma winery and in 2006 renamed the united property Rubicon Estate after his flagship wine. Then, in 2011, he tapped Philippe Bascaules, estate director of Bordeaux first-growth

## NEW WINES FROM AN OLD LABEL

**2009 Inglenook Rubicon** (\$170 to \$200) The flagship. Big, concentrated cabernet blend with smoky, chocolatey notes. The 2011, tasted in barrel, is dense and structured, with deep mineral flavors.

**2009 Inglenook Cask Cabernet** (\$80) The second wine. Less concentrated, with tastes of ripe plum and licorice. The 2011, tasted in barrel, is lighter and fresher, with cassis and red fruits.

**2011 Inglenook Blancaneaux** (\$62) A dry white from roussanne, marsanne and viognier grapes. It offers floral aromas and mineral and honey flavors. **E.Mc.**

Chateau Margaux, to reduce the number of wines and return them to Inglenook’s more classic, elegant style. Samples from Bascaules’s first vintage, 2011, are stunning, with fresh cassis flavors, floral aromas, lower alcohol and a long, complex finish. (See box.)

Coppola still lacked the final piece, the Inglenook name. “I knew I had to have it,” he says. A member of his Napa Valley poker group provided a connection to Wine Group LLC, which then owned it, and he struck a deal in April 2011, enabling him to rechristen the property Inglenook.

As we walk out to the garden, Coppola ticks off what he thinks it takes to be a first-growth wine estate: “A winery has to be in a major wine region, have made great wine 50 years ago, have a team of people who have made great wine, an owner who will do whatever it takes, and you need to make enough so that it can be tasted around the world. And it has to have a great story.”

I ask Coppola if he’d thought of doing a film about Inglenook. He shakes his head and says: “It’s in the glass. You’re drinking the expression of the story.”

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