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SPECIAL REPRINT
Jayson Woodbridge
AS SEEN IN
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From his home in Calistoga, Jayson Woodbridge pursues success in Napa and beyond.



NAPA VALLEY'S CONTRARIAN

Jayson Woodbridge of Hundred Acre and Layer Cake lives life on his own terms

BY TIM FISH // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSAYMN HARRIS

Describing Jayson Woodbridge requires a thesaurus. Passionate is a good word, along with driven, charismatic and hedonistic. You could add exacting, arrogant and volatile. Woodbridge is happy to paint a target on his chest and dare you to shoot if he's trying to make a point. And he's always trying to make a point.

"I had cancer when I was 18, and I don't view the world the same way as everyone else. I want to make sure everything I do is the top of the game," says Woodbridge,

51. He's had high-profile run-ins with neighbors as well as county officials over the years over the construction of his underground winery outside St. Helena. "I'm not known as a diplomat in this valley. I've told more than a few people to eff off."

Woodbridge's flagship brand is Hundred Acre, a collection of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons that sell for \$400 a bottle and typically earn outstanding scores from *Wine Spectator*. Woodbridge was intent on making a statement with the label's first release, the Hundred Acre Cabernet Kayli Morgan Vineyard 2000, released in 2003. He set the price at \$150, an audacious move considering that



Woodbridge tastes barrel samples with assistant winemaker Angelina Mondavi in the cellar of his 14,000-square-foot winery, an underground structure built into a mountainside north of St. Helena.

at the time, long-established cult Cabs like Caymus Special Selection and Colgin were selling for the same price.

In contrast to Hundred Acre is Layer Cake, an eclectic portfolio from five different countries that includes a Spanish Garnacha, a Malbec from Argentina and an Australian Shiraz, all of which retail for \$16 or less. There's also a Napa Port, several California Pinot Noirs and even a Kentucky Bourbon named Duke, done in partnership with the family of late actor John Wayne.

It is an incongruous assortment of wines, to be sure, but for Woodbridge, who made his stake as an investment banker, a whim promptly becomes an obsession. Although based in Napa, he is on the road eight or nine months a year, usually with winemaker Helen Mawson, who is also his wife, or other members of a small team he calls "the merry band of misfits," which includes assistant winemaker Angelina Mondavi, chefs Mariano Orlando and Michael Laukert, and Woodbridge's mother, Pat.

Woodbridge is in perpetual motion. He knows what he wants and he's a man in a hurry to do it. "Every time I see Jayson, he has something new on the horizon," observes friend and fellow winemaker Philippe Melka.

He brings the same energy to having a good time as he does to achievement and business. "Do I drink too much? Yes! Do I party too much? Yeah? Every day is Saturday night and every Saturday night is New Year's Eve," Woodbridge admits. "I had enough chemo to kill Napa Valley. I don't assume I'm here for the long run."

Standing on the patio outside his Calistoga home, Woodbridge runs a hand through his untamed salt-and-pepper hair. With his raw-hide jacket and scuffed cowboy boots, he looks more like an Austin, Texas, hipster than a Napa winemaker. His residence is a luxuriously rustic cottage where life, centered around food and wine, is focused on the kitchen. Outside, there's two wood-burning ovens, an extensive garden and even a smoke house.

Woodbridge was born in 1963 to a middle-class family in Toronto. His father was a radio broadcaster and occasional actor, and his mother was a cardiac care nurse. He spent his summers in the Niagara Peninsula wine country, where his Italian step-grandfather introduced him to wine as soon as he could hold a cup.

Food and cooking were always a major part of his life. His grandparents owned a pizza parlor in Toronto and he grew up watching his grandfather toss pizza into the air. His grandmother's pizza sauce was a state secret. Woodbridge says, "She went to her grave with [the recipe]."

He was just a kid when he started reading his mother's cookbooks, and once missed the school bus while trying to make crêpe Suzette. He walked to school in the snow that morning, but his teacher refused believe his excuse.

His wine labels are often derived from his childhood memories. Cherry Pie pays homage to his grandmother's baking, and Layer Cake took its name from a conversation with his grandfather. "He said, 'You know the vines go through layers of soil like the layers of your grandmother's cake,'" Woodbridge recalls. "And that's where it gets its complexity."

Woodbridge concedes he was a wild child in his teen years, but he found discipline later while serving with the parachute regiment of the Canadian army after college. After the military, Woodbridge

“JAYSON PICKS UP EVERYTHING SO FAST. HE HAS A GREAT PALATE, AND AS A WINEMAKER HE IS EXTREMELY TALENTED.” —PHILIPPE MELKA

earned his own way. “I tended bar. I waited tables,” he says. He eventually found success as an investment banker in Toronto, and by the late 1990s had accrued a sufficient nest egg to “retire” and start Hundred Acre with the help of investors and partners Kevin Fortun and Chris Radomski.

For five or six years Woodbridge considered several winegrowing regions, but eventually settled on Napa Valley. “It was because of the light,” Woodbridge says. “The sheer beauty of Napa was special. Having been in many of the world’s greatest regions, it just felt right, 100 percent right.”

Woodbridge made Napa home in 1999. Mawson, now 43, had arrived a year before. A New Zealand native, she came to California with a backpack and \$750. She interned at Joseph Phelps and Miner Family and then worked with Melka before joining the Hundred Acre winemaking team. “And it’s been chaos ever since!” she quips.

From the patio, Woodbridge gazes out across the neighborhood. There’s not another house to be seen. Just down a gentle slope is historic Eisele Vineyard, best known as the source of Araujo Estate’s Cabernet Sauvignon and considered hallowed ground by many. A stone’s throw away is Woodbridge’s Few & Far Between Vineyard, which Hundred Acre bottles as a vineyard-designated Cabernet.

Few & Far Between is one of three vineyards that Woodbridge owns in Napa Valley, all of which are farmed organically although they are not certified.

The 5-acre Few & Far Between site, planted in rocky alluvial soils, is 90 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and the rest Cabernet Franc.

South of the home ranch along Silverado Trail and at the base of Howell Mountain is the 9-acre Kayli Morgan Vineyard, Woodbridge’s first vineyard and the source of Hundred Acres’ debut bottling. It’s a flat site on pebbly clay soils planted 100 percent to Cabernet Sauvignon.

The 45-acre Ark Vineyard is the only Napa site Woodbridge developed himself. Located on Glass Mountain above St. Helena, it ranges from 300 to 700 feet in elevation and features distinctive red soils rich with volcanic glass.

“All three vineyards just spoke to me: ‘This is it!’” he says. Woodbridge scouted the sites mostly on his own, but also with the advice of friends such as Napa vineyard manager Jim Barbour.

Top-scoring current releases include the Hundred Acre Cabernet

Sauvignon Napa Valley Few And Far Between Vineyard 2012 (95 points, \$400), a powerful red brimming with expressive flavors of dark berry, cherry, plum and cassis. The Hundred Acre Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Precious 2012 (94, \$450) represents a special selection cuvée drawn from the single vineyards. The Hundred Acre line also includes an Australian red, the Shiraz Barossa Valley Deep Time Ancient Way Vineyard Summer’s Blocks; the 2009 (90, \$400) is a dense and rich mix of plum and currant fruit.

“I keep a very exacting standard in the vineyard,” Woodbridge says. “I prune to one cluster [per shoot]. At harvest, the vineyards will get five different passes. It takes a long time and it’s very intense.” At the winery, grapes are sorted berry by berry, and Wood-

bridge says the result looks a little like caviar when it goes into the barrel.

Compromise is not a word Woodbridge likes, Melka says. There was a point during the 2009 growing season, for example, when Woodbridge nearly trashed his Napa crop, concerned that it wasn’t meeting his standards. Melka offered to buy some of the grapes, but Woodbridge dismissed the idea. If Woodbridge hadn’t ultimately found a way to salvage the crop, he would have destroyed the whole yield.

Melka, whose clients include an array of top producers, such as Bryant Family and Dana Estates, was the initial winemaker for Hundred Acre. Woodbridge, who has no formal winemaking

training, slowly assumed the duties over several vintages while Melka continued to help out as a consultant until 2013.

“Jayson picks up everything so fast,” Melka says. “He has a great palate, and as a winemaker he is extremely talented.”

Hundred Acre is fermented in new French oak, typically 500-liter puncheons, and Woodbridge varies the time on oak vintage by vintage. “The 2012s spent almost 30 months in the barrel because I didn’t think they were ready until then,” he says.

Woodbridge produces three other labels that are exclusively Californian. Fortunate Son is a Napa Cabernet produced from two vineyard sources. Cherry Pie is a Pinot Noir label with three vineyard-designated bottlings from Napa and Sonoma. The value-oriented Cherry Tart brand offers Pinot Noir and Chardonnay under the California designation.

Layer Cake is Woodbridge’s most widely available label. He



The Woodbridge family, circa 1969, in Toronto, where Jayson (far left) was raised. Much of the inspiration for his wine brands, along with his interest in food, comes from his grandparents Albert and Ruth Orlando (center) and his mother, Patricia (right).



Composed of red volcanic soils and rising to an elevation of 700 feet on the slopes of Glass Mountain, Ark Vineyard is one of Woodbridge's three Napa Valley sites.

produces about 500,000 cases annually, with distribution across the United States. There are seven different varietals from four continents. The label debuted with a 2005 Shiraz, after Woodbridge first visited Australia. He pulls from a collection of vineyards in South Australia, some of which encompass old-vine plots.

His next impulse led him across the globe to make Malbec in Mendoza, Argentina, and to the hillsides of Puglia, in Italy, to produce Primitivo (aka Zinfandel). "I go to places I like. I just fell in love with Barossa," he says, "and I felt Argentina had promise."

Woodbridge expanded Layer Cake to include a Garnacha from the Calatayud region of Spain, as well as Cabernet, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from California. Except for the Primitivo, which is fermented mostly in stainless steel, the wines are fermented and aged in 100 percent French oak barrels, about 40 percent or less of which is new.

It's not a cost-effective way to make value wine, and few labels pack in so much quality for the price. Woodbridge dismisses the idea that the high-volume Layer Cake brand finances the luxury, Hundred Acre wines. "Are you kidding? Layer Cake is a good way to lose money," he says.

Recent releases offer bang for the buck. From California, the Layer Cake Pinot Noir Central Coast 2013 (88, \$15) is a fresh and vibrant red, exhibiting dense berry, toasty oak and dried herb flavors, and the Layer Cake Cabernet Sauvignon California 2012 (85, \$16) delivers a mocha-laced core of red and dark berry fruit that finishes with a tannic grip, while from Australia, the Layer

Cake Shiraz South Australia 2013 (88, \$15) is a dense and expressive version, with blueberry, spice and tea leaf flavors riding on velvety tannins.

Friends of Woodbridge in Napa Valley scoffed at Layer Cake, convinced it would tarnish the Hundred Acre brand. As Woodbridge sees it, he was paying tribute to his grandfather, who first taught him about wine. "I realized that he would not have been able to afford Hundred Acre. He was a working-class man," he says. "There aren't many wines that would prompt people to move up from Budweiser. I just liked the idea of a young guy putting 20 bucks on the counter and getting some change back on a good wine and having a spaghetti dinner with his girlfriend."

Then, with a saucy smile, he adds, "I also did it to maybe shame the industry a little bit." That's textbook Woodbridge. He has his own plan, and if you don't like it, that's not his problem. Take, for example, one of his latest wine editions—a \$20 Cabernet from Italy with a tattooed bad girl on the label. The name of the wine? If You See Kay.

It was perhaps inevitable, given Woodbridge's personality, that he would clash with the Napa Valley establishment. He faced his first obstacles within a few years of his arrival, when he started work on a cave and underground winery northwest of St. Helena. Soon he was drawing the ire of his neighbors as well as county planning officials.

Built into the side of a mountain, underneath Ark Vineyard,

the 14,000-square-foot facility was carved out of rock and reinforced with steel. "It's built like NORAD," Woodbridge says. "Basically, it was designed to take a 10-point earthquake."

By the time Woodbridge filed for a use permit in June 2005, construction was well under way. Neighbors complained about the noise and disruption during a series of highly publicized meetings before the Napa County Planning Commission.

Much of the controversy focused on whether Woodbridge and his investors had approval for the construction. Woodbridge argued that the state, not the county, regulated cave construction and that he had the proper paperwork. The planning commission eventually approved the use permit with several conditions, mostly involving structural details and a fire suppression system.

The California Department of Alcohol and Beverage Control Board got involved in 2006 when it said the winery lacked the proper license to make wine. The Napa County District Attorney's office filed a criminal complaint for the same violation. "Jayson became the poster child of the bad boys," Mawson says.

Eventually, Woodbridge and his investors paid a \$1,000 fine to the ABC and agreed to do community charity work. "That," Woodbridge says, "and I paid a half-million dollars in lawyer fees." He also needed to spend several thousand dollars to bring the structure up to code.

"Jayson is very self-assured. He couldn't understand why things just couldn't be done his way," says Saintsbury winemaker David Graves, who was on the planning commission at the time. "That was pretty evident early on."

Today, Woodbridge spends less and less time in Napa, disillusioned with many aspects of valley life.

"I am worried that the noble farming traditions that prevailed for a century in Napa Valley are being replaced by an ever-increasing level of gentrification and snobbery," he says. "And I do not see why the county has chosen to be so uncooperative and over-police, over-politicize and over-regulate the very industry that is the lifeblood of the valley."

A father of three from his first marriage, Woodbridge is not as young as he used to be, or as svelte. But he is all about living life well, although his personal budget was recently squeezed. "I've gone through

a costly divorce, which means I will not be getting a private jet any time soon," he says.

But business is thriving. There are more than 3,000 people on the Hundred Acre waiting list, and the demand for Layer Cake outpaces supply. He continues to focus on Duke Bourbon and is helping his brother Cameron Woodbridge with a new vineyard development in Napa. He's also writing two books and a screenplay.

While Woodbridge is quick to say he doesn't care what other people think, he seems to complain about his detractors a great deal, using a colorful vocabulary while doing it. His critics, Melka says, don't realize the big heart Woodbridge has, although his friend does admit that, "Jayson comes off as a kind of cave guy if you don't know him very well."

As Mawson puts it, "He's just the right side of crazy." □



Woodbridge at home in Calistoga with his wife, winemaker Helen Mawson, and their two dogs. Mawson arrived in California from New Zealand in 1998 and cut her teeth at Joseph Phelps, Miner Family and Vineyard 29 before joining the team at Hundred Acre.