

A

Vision behind PlumpJack

Gordon Getty is equal parts sharp intellect and creative passion. Fourth of five children of oil baron J. Paul Getty, Gordon and his family fill the society pages in San Francisco and socialize with their rich and famous peers.

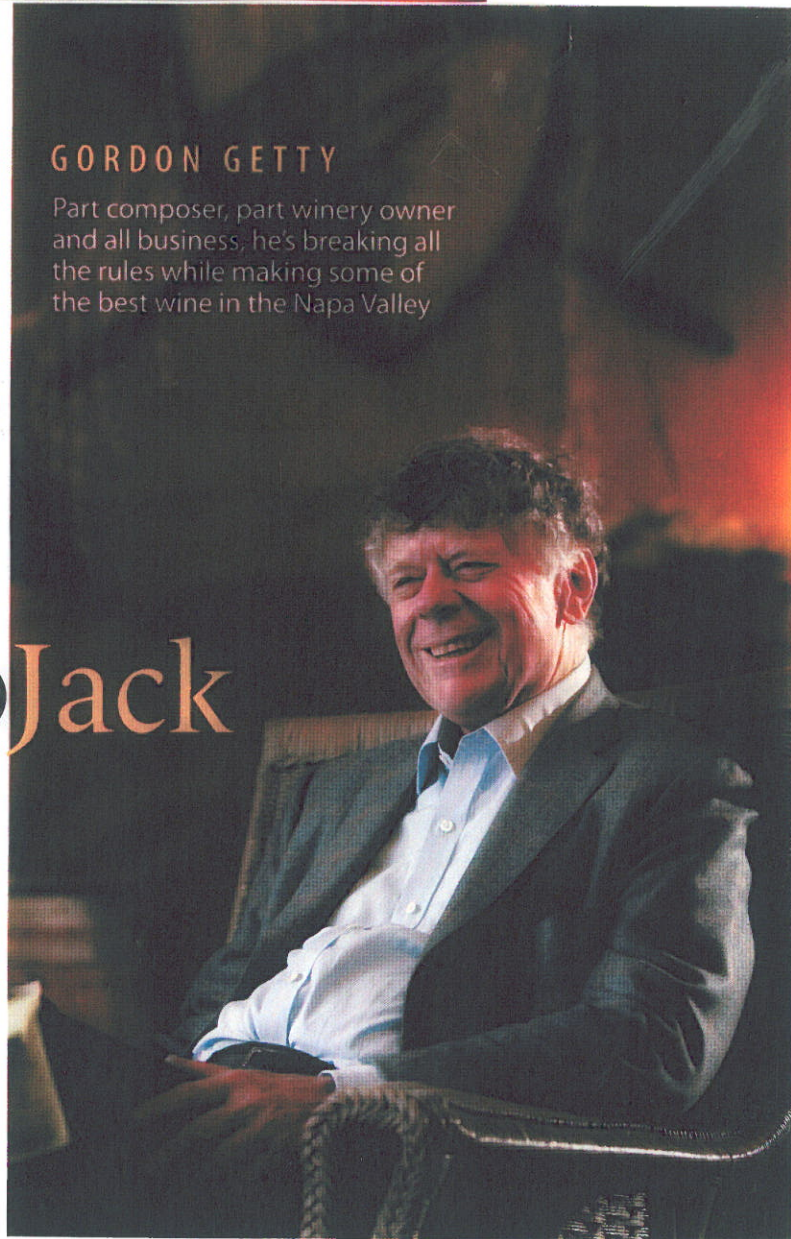
Once dubbed the hardest-working heir in business, he successfully sold his father's company, Getty Oil, for a headline-making \$10.1 billion in 1984 to Texaco. He's started businesses of his own, written operas, given generously to the arts — and staked a big claim in the wine business.

PlumpJack is both the title of one of Getty's operas and the name of his winery in Napa Valley. A respected producer of Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon, PlumpJack is also the name on two wine shops, a nightclub and a handful of restaurants in San Francisco, as well as another establishment in Squaw Valley. The folks at PlumpJack also now run the Carneros Inn, a deluxe resort and restaurant just south of Napa.

A resident of San Francisco who insists he's a "city mouse, not a farmer," the 73-year-old Getty formally studied piano, voice and music theory. Ask who he is and Getty, tall, thin and otherworldly, with gentle blue eyes and a booming voice, will emphatically answer, "Composer!" But he's as passionate about wine as he

GORDON GETTY

Part composer, part winery owner and all business, he's breaking all the rules while making some of the best wine in the Napa Valley



CHARLIE GEFSELL

Gordon Getty, who sold Getty Oil for \$10.1 billion, says wine is not a bottom-line business.

is about music, and his frequent trips to Wine Country leave wide wakes and lots of buzz. He shared his thoughts on the subject from the tasting room and cellar of PlumpJack winery.

SAVOR: How did you get involved in wine?

GETTY: My last stepfather — my mother's last husband, a hell of a nice guy — was

a brain surgeon and a wealthy guy and happened to be a wine fan and collector and enthusiast. In those days — this is the late '50s, early '60s — all the world's great wines were French. There was nothing else to drink, people thought, and that was the right attitude at that time. Now I think it's a different ballgame.

SAVOR: How did PlumpJack happen?

It's not a place where you invest in the wine business for money purposes. In fact, the less you care about the money, the more you are likely to make some."

GETTY: We made a deal on this property and we were going to call the wine something else and it went bust and so I bought out all the partners and talked (San Francisco Mayor) Gavin Newsom into running it. To get a stake in the game. Since then it's done very well. Our first release was 1995 with stuff we grew on the property.

SAVOR: You've been described as a 21st-century entrepreneur. Is the wine business a smart place to put your money?

GETTY: I have no idea. We lucked out like a bandit, but I didn't go into it to make a lot of money. And indeed, if you are in it to make a lot of money I don't suggest Napa as the place because Napa is a place for fanatic wines, not bottom-line wines.

SAVOR: Do you think PlumpJack has achieved that level, of fanatic wines?

GETTY: Oh, from the beginning, those were Gavin's marching orders.

SAVOR: The decision to go with Cabernet, was that from your stepfather's influence?

GETTY: Mother Nature makes that decision. This land seems to have been suited for Cabernet. It is about my favorite. I like the robust reds, and I also like Shiraz, that's mainly an Australian specialty.

SAVOR: Do you consider winemaking a legitimate art form?

GETTY: My only reservation there is that we have so little control. The winemaker has some; I wonder if he has enough to call it an art form. Is it more craftsmanship than art? It's an art form in a sense that it's driven by a sense of beauty, but that goes for craftsmanship also. The difference is that a craftsman is more limited by his materials than an artist is.

SAVOR: What are your plans for PlumpJack?

GETTY: We bought a property on Howell Mountain recently, where we're going to grow stuff other than Cab. I forget what. It so happens that I never really understood Pinot Noir, so I would just as soon not grow Pinot Noir because why do the stuff that isn't my favorite even if it should be? I don't even understand the great Burgundies.

Pinot is delicate and Syrah is a smash-mouth wine. I'd heard of smashmouth football so I borrowed the term. I like smashmouth wines. It doesn't mean I

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CHARLI

Getty puts Australian wines at the top of the list as the world's best, followed by the United States, then France.

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like alcoholic wines, I don't want abrasive wines, but I like wines that fill the mouth.

My God, I love the Aussie Shiraz. I worship the Australian wines. Honest to God, I put them number one in the world, in every grape, every price category. The United States I put second, not exclusively California.

SAVOR: Are you not much of a white wine drinker?

GETTY: I love white wine, but again I'm a little bit blind in that, to me, all white wine tastes more or less alike. There isn't that broad a range. And my favorite is Chardonnay. I love both the French style without so much malolactic and oak, but I also love the California style. I love the loud, vulgar California style. Vive la difference.

SAVOR: When did you decide to go to screw caps, and why?

GETTY: It would have been the early '90s, when Gavin first got involved up

here. We were up to observe a machine which re-corks old bottles in a vacuum. Somebody said, did you know that there is a consensus of opinion among those who know wine, those who make it, people at UC Davis, experts, that screw cap would probably be a better finish, not just cheaper or more convenient, just flat better than cork? And I said, new one on me. The rest of the sentence was, but everyone's afraid to be first to try it. I said, I'm not. It's a no-brainer, it's so obvious.

But with conditions. One, UC Davis has got to vouch for all this. We'll just grab one of their professors and pay him his fee, but he's got to vouch that this is a good idea in the first place. Two, only no more than half, I said to Gavin, of our premium (wine) is to be in screw cap, the rest is the best cork we can find. The reason for that is so you can compare them over the decades. This is a marketing statement that this is not about saving a buck or sparing the cork trees, this is about quality. Only my most expensive wine, only half of that — and the final little condition, we have to charge more for the screw cap than for

the cork finish. This is an in-your-face marketing thing to rub it in that this is about quality, not about economics.

I like irreverence, I like thumbing one's nose at the way you've got to do it. Tell me why you've got to do it that way, then I'll do it that way. I want the world to understand this is an experiment. I didn't say I was right except, by God, I was right to try it. Shame on my colleagues that I had to be the first to try it.

SAVOR: It sounds as though it was important to you to be involved in a lot of the decisions here; you didn't want to just be the money.

GETTY: Only the objectives. I don't get into the nitty-gritty much at all. It's not a place where you invest in the wine business for money purposes. In fact, the less you care about the money, the more you are likely to make some. What I told Gavin when we first started was I want fanaticism, but fanaticism in the black. Meaning, I don't care how little I make, but if we start losing money, then you start losing morale, you start losing peo-

ple and you don't even get the product, so just try to keep it fanaticism in the black. That was music to his ears because he was born with that, he's a fanatic and he was born to keep things in the black. But in fact we're making lots of money. That's my advice to winemakers in Napa: If you are trying just to bottom-line it, there are other places to go.

SAVOR: Was it important to you that this be a winery people could visit?

GETTY: That's part of the economics. I'm not obtuse to the economics, of course as long as it doesn't interfere with the quality, oh yeah. If you don't have a tasting room, you're missing one of your best bets. You're missing a chance to cash in on success.

SAVOR: Where does the name PlumpJack come from?

GETTY: PlumpJack is the name of my opera, the only opera I finished. Even that opera I'm still working on. One of the scenes from it has already been recorded and that's on my new CD, which has had wonderful reviews and a lot of air play.

SAVOR: Are you constantly writing music?

GETTY: Yes. My occupation is composer. I do other things, but composer is what I am.

SAVOR: You're going to Bordeaux soon to visit the great chateaux?

GETTY: For me, la belle France is fighting for third (place). I put Australia one, America second. We learned everything we know from France, but I've got news for these sweet, wonderful people. They don't have a monopoly on terroir, OK? There's competition out there. They make amazing wines — so do other people. Therefore, la belle France is duking it out. To me they beat Italy and Spain, they beat Lebanon, and they still beat Chile and Argentina. But watch out for Chile and Argentina, and watch out for South Africa. South Africa makes some 100-point wines in my book. How can you make the best wine unless you know who your competition is?

SAVOR: Sounds as though you do.

GETTY: It's like composers. You ask me who are the great composers, to me, I stand up there, with the others, but I'll tell you who the others are. Same with my wine.

— *Virginie Boone*