



## A LOGIC OF OLD CARS

*The Story of Toby Hill and the origin of Phillips Hill Estates*

### I. Art Begets Wine

Art has a funny way of leaking out into everything once it into you. Toby Hill sublet his New York loft for one summer to visit San Francisco, where he had grown up. When he got back to New York in the fall, he realized he 'd made a big mistake, subletting. It wasn't the same anymore. His years of living the urban artist's lifestyle, with its gallery openings, connections, hustle, was abruptly finished. So he returned again to California and drifted north, drawn by a friend who was growing grapes in the hills of Comptche. Supported by a livelihood supplying Italian plaster for architectural projects, Hill built a house overlooking the Anderson Valley and hung his artwork on the walls. The house was intended to be his studio, but it was such a nice living space that he decided to build himself a studio elsewhere on the property.

Then art took hold again, this time disguised as a batch of Pinot Noir handed over to him mid-vintage. He became a winemaker. Of course the building intended to be his art studio is being taken over by the new winery, so he has plans to build yet another structure for art.

Hill takes on winemaking with creative restlessness, merging new ideas about vinting grapes with everything else he knows: architecture, Saul Steinberg, hand troweled Italian plaster, a powerful swimming stroke. Fermentation kinetics and the hierarchy of grape sugars are fused with things of his knowing: his etchings, drawings, painted cartoony thought clouds, those little stories in your head that can design your whole life.

What pushes the whole enterprise above the waterline is the mystery of the soil, the unlikeliness of its location, and the goldmine of genuinely good grapes. His first vintage was turned over to him in mid-production by winemaker John Pepe, who wasn't able to carry it to completion himself. The Phillips Hill 2002 Pinot Noir was quickly embraced by Sommelier Mark Bowery, a consultant to several fine wine purveyors in Mendocino.

Bowery was attracted to the notion of wine from this untried viticultural area, Comptche, the closest winegrowing region to the village of Mendocino. He found the wine to be of memorable quality, heavier-bodied than most Pinot Noirs from neighboring Anderson Valley, yet soft and supple for its substance. With a little generosity on Hill's part, he was able to offer it by the glass at Cafe Beaujolais and Albion River Inn.

## II. A Logic of Old Cars

To drive into the property now is to have your astonishment broken. The landscape has reached a point of ultimate thermodynamic stability. One more widget, one more tractor toppled over on top of a Karmen Ghia won't add or detract from the overall infrastructure of twisted rusted American discards. From the gate, at which it is announced that this is Oppenlander Vineyards, the Surprise Valley Ranch of the Shandels, in the rolling hills of Comptche with their opalescent grass green and patchwork of oak and coast redwood stands, lies a view in jaggedy silhouette of abandoned vehicles.

On the drive in, this coagulated seam of internal combustion grammar begins to be articulated as several acres of fire trucks from another era merged in desperate oxidation with Plymouths and Fords and mitochondria and rust buckets, water tankers from the 1950s still blurting out "Surprise Valley Ranch" from fading painted sides, toppled four seaters, John Deere's infantile nightmares, the original and final Bentley. The mind tries to fit awe into itself as it takes in the enormity of the piece of work, but the effort fails at the next turn of the driveway.

That is when the mind cracks open and the stars invade at high noon and a dizziness develops as it is seen that this opening shot, this ridge of wonder, is but a tiny piece of the enormous spread of cars and trucks and tractors that were towed and dropped by the side of the road, studding meadows and reaches and gullies, competing with stands of trees. A tow truck is still towing a Hudson, both of which have vines and grasses and thistles growing up through their engine blocks, as if the effort of being the only ingenious patch of ground within 100 miles also drove down the stake into the heart of the beast.

It's unmanageable, but the momentum of the place gives it a completeness. This is life in Comptche, California. It brings on a grin the size of a cherry bomb. Over here a stack of engine blocks that mount up the height of a small shed, in the next clearing a stack of car

batteries that are almost as high, and behind the barn, a road turns off, heading along another vista of mortal remains of the elemental iron, the alloy steel, the invention of exploding pistons, and then there ' s the vineyard. It ' s almost a letdown.

Back in 1984, William Shandel noticed a tendency for folks in the area to plant grape vines, and he did his own experiment, bringing home a collection of every type of wine grape he could find, planted 16 rows with 16 vines per row, 15 different kinds of grape, Pinot, Gewurz. People kept telling him, "White Riesling!" He stood over the vines while they did their best, then he pulled out all those except what seemed to do all right, and began a bigger plot. He ended up with Pinot Noir.

It ' s a great story, and one that most people don ' t need or want to know in order to appreciate the wine. What ' s important is that the first vintages are showing that the grapes have found a fortuitous planting. They ripen in the cooler reach of the Pacific corridor, giving plentiful material to the wine, substance that can ' t be invented by manipulating winemaking style if it isn ' t present to begin with in the fruit.

Any wine of longstanding interest, one that ' s got mystery and spunk and surprise to it, merges all the elements of its formation into a compelling question mark that doesn ' t give itself away at the first glass. Inevitably, the story makes the edge of the glass tingle in the mind long after the wine itself is gone and gives that indefinable unique character, the spark, the mechanical energy. It ' s a logic of old cars, an artist who doesn ' t know how to stop merging elements of his own life with what he ' s found in his path. And it ' s a righteous glass of Pinot Noir.

Theresa Whitehill, Spring 2005

Theresa Whitehill is a California writer and poet. Her work has been published in *Stags ' Leap Winery: A Guide to the Estate, Saudades*, and *Napa Valley: Portrait of a Community*, along with regional northern California literary magazines. Her letterpress broadsides and publications are in the collections of the Getty Museum, the Bancroft Library, Brown University ' s John Hay Library, and other public and private collections.