

THE HEFNERS: EVERYTHING COMING TOGETHER

Margaret Rand meets Robert and MeiLi Hefner on their Ramiiisol estate in Virginia, where they are pursuing a Jeffersonian dream of natural wine through determination, eclectic knowledge, and unconventional wisdom

We have to start somewhere, so why not with the *Dallas Times Herald* in 1982: “A ruggedly handsome, intelligent and wealthy oilman, [who] would appear to embody the American dream.”

We could continue with the reams of photographs that have been taken over the years: Robert A Hefner III fishing, on a yacht, playing polo, playing soccer, with a yak in Tibet, shooting in Scotland, shooting in Norfolk, shooting elk in Colorado, studying Aboriginal rock art in Australia, skiing here, there, and everywhere, gaining his black belt in judo, with his racehorses, with Margaret Thatcher, with Stephen Hawking, with George Bush (both of them), with Ronald Reagan, with Gerald Ford, with Bill Clinton, with Barack Obama—even with Putin, though actually with Boris Beresovsky, with Putin in the photograph because he was first assistant to the mayor of St Petersburg. Even with Phyllis Diller.

Then there are the reams of press cuttings: Hefner talking about western Oklahoma’s Andarko Basin and its vast reserves of natural gas; Hefner talking about his racehorses (he and his business partner nearly bought Shergar, or at least a share in him, but the Aga Khan decided to syndicate him in Europe instead, and we know how that ended); Hefner facing bankruptcy (not because of the racehorses); Hefner buying chunks of the Berlin Wall; Hefner collecting art; Hefner setting up charitable foundations. In 1971, *National Geographic* said that he “must rank among the most optimistic of all time.” Ten years later, the *New York Times* said he “is considered one of the world’s premier natural gas wildcatters.”

And now he makes wine, which, you could argue, is a neat consolidation of all the many aspects of Robert Hefner: geologist, environmentalist, artist—and usefully, successful gas wildcatter, since the wine estate is not yet profitable, though he says it will be, one day. He emphasizes that this is not a hobby. He makes wine in the warm, humid climate of Virginia, not far from Monticello, and he wants to achieve the Jeffersonian dream of making natural wine in Virginia, to which end he works with soil consultant Pedro Parra and winemaking consultant Alberto Antonini (see *WFW* 65, pp.106–09). Antonini was induced to help him by the late Gianfranco Soldera of Case Basse, who took the Hefners under his wing, and of whose wines they have a good enough collection to serve them to visiting journalists at lunch if they’re not serving their own wines. At the moment, they make just 3,000–5,000 bottles a year, though this will increase. And “we just drink the best wines in the world to see if we can match up,” he says.

We’ve gone swiftly from “he” to “they.” It is both Hefner and his wife MeiLi who are the subjects of this piece. They met in London in 2002, and Robert gets very slightly tearful at the memory of their meeting; they were married within the year.

Ramiiisol rising

But first, the estate and the wines. It’s called Ramiiisol, a variation on their previous house in Aspen, Colorado, which was called Ramiiilaj, each name a nod to Hefner being the III of his name. They found it when they went to Charlottesville for Robert to have a heart procedure; they had not thought of making wine until then, but when they had time to kill in Virginia, their driver suggested some tasting visits to wine estates, and the seed was sown.

They looked in France and Italy, but everything there was all established, all arranged; in Virginia, it was still all to be done. So, in 2013 they bought these 140 acres (57ha), attracted by the fact that however you approached the property you went uphill: Robert’s experience told him that the bedrock was folded and fractured and therefore perhaps interesting. The Blue Ridge Mountains are on the horizon; you can’t see any other house, and the first thing they did with the vines that were already planted was to stop using any chemicals. The vines went cold turkey, and the 2015 was a write-off; it was another year before they got much wine, but Parra dug soil pits everywhere and luckily was thrilled by the rust-red soil over deeply fractured and decomposed gneiss that he discovered.

To find a world-class winemaker, he asked Dirk Niepoort (see *WFW* 78, pp.118–21), who said they were all brainwashed and what Robert needed was an excellent vineyard manager who would learn to make wine—so they have Robbie Corpora. Half Sicilian and half Japanese, Corpora was born into a local winemaking family and has fully grown into the role.

By now you might well be wondering how a natural gas wildcatter knew Soldera; how he knew Dirk Niepoort? In one sense, it’s simple: He and MeiLi drink a lot of good wine. But so do lots of people, so we need to go back a bit to see why the likes of Soldera would pass more than the time of day with just another energy millionaire.

An intent to succeed

Hefner’s family is from Texas but had been in Oklahoma for a couple of generations because they were in oil and that’s where the oil was. His grandfather grew up in poverty and became a

Robert and MeiLi Hefner harvesting at Ramiiisol in Virginia, where they aspire to make “some of the most wonderful Cabernet Franc in the world.”

All photography courtesy of the Hefners / Ramiiisol



lawyer, specialized in oil and gas law, went into politics and bought land and mineral rights, judging the potential of the latter by the topography of the former—which is exactly what his grandson does. His son, Robert A Hefner Jr, was also a lawyer specializing in oil and gas and got to know the Roosevelts. They were at dinner in the White House on March 27, 1935, when Mrs Hefner, actress Louise Currie, went into labor. The roads were blocked with snow and ice, and the Secret Service cleared the way to the hospital. Franklin D Roosevelt’s son Elliott, an old friend, became the boy’s godfather.

We don’t have all day, so we’ll skip a few years. Hefner Jr joined the Hefner Production Company, which produced oil. Robert A Hefner III—our Robert Hefner—read geology at Oklahoma University and initially joined Phillips Petroleum Company, then did a year at his father’s company and left in 1957 with no plan of what to do next. “I wanted to start on my own,” he says. “I tried being a consultant, but I realized I had to be on my own.”

For that he had to raise funds. He tried in Los Angeles (his mother had been a film actress, and after his parents had divorced, he had been brought up in southern California and used to watch Fred Astaire practicing at home), but they all wanted a chunk of the profits. So, he tried New York, where he had just one contact; and money was raised. GHK was founded.

The initials stand for the names of the three founders: Laurence A Glover, Hefner, and David O’D Kennedy, the first a financier and the third a maker of floor tiles. What GHK did

was deep natural-gas exploration in western Oklahoma and Texas. Robert believed—in the face of all expert opinion to the contrary—that natural gas reserves existed, and could be extracted, far deeper than anyone said. They designed the equipment and the technology to do it—these didn’t exist, because the task was impossible. But it worked. In fact, it worked so well that natural gas prices collapsed. The Penn Square Bank, of which GHK was a major client, failed.

Bankruptcy beckoned... but was avoided. “I took personal responsibility for everything,” says Robert. “I was negotiating with welders who were saying, ‘Don’t file—it will put us into bankruptcy.’ I fought for the people I owed.” GHK sold some land, restructured, and survived.

“I knew there were problems in the industry,” he says of this time, “but I thought I could get through. Maybe it was ego. One night, I had a dream. I was a rocket, going up into space. Suddenly there was the face, the voice, and the hands of God, and he hit me on the head, and said, ‘Feel that when you come out here again.’ I started to work on the elimination of ego. Ego puts you above other people, on a rocket ship.”

And all this is relevant not just because it illustrates what Hefner regards as his defining quality, his “intent to succeed,” but also his determination that received opinion, conventional wisdom—accepted science, if you like—is not necessarily right. What makes him more than just another energy millionaire is his deep interests across boundaries. If he believed in hell, he would expect there to be a special corner of

it reserved for scientists who think in silos. “If you think outside silos, you don’t get funded,” he allows. But he’s not looking for funding these days, and he does some funding himself, currently into soil microfungi, on which they are working with Merlin Sheldrake, author of *Entangled Life* (Random House, 2020). “If you accept that there is something—magic, if you like—beyond what we know, there’s lots we don’t know yet. Biology is driven by long processes that existed 500 million years before life.” When they became friends with Soldera, he took them first to his gardens, then to his pond, and talked of frogs and insects, and only then to his vineyard. Now the Hefners refer not to their vineyard but to their “territorium”: They are bringing life back to what had been a chemically farmed estate, and watching the sea eagles and the bluebirds and the butterflies return has been part of the project. The whole project, perhaps.

Hefner’s interests span art, history, technology, geology, philosophy, microbiology—you name an ology, and he’s into it. He made a key discovery when he was about 14 and had a revelatory science teacher called Ray Alf, who took the class to collect pond water and then look at it under a microscope. Hefner had wanted to be an architect up until then. But under that microscope, “I saw evolution, the survival of the fittest. It changed my life. I saw an entire, capable, flourishing society I’d never known about.” Not only does he venerate the memory of Alf, but he has preserved his school notes and drawings from that lesson and had them bound in green leather, with marbled

endpapers. “And this is what I have come back to,” he says. “I saw in that microscopic world a world just as organized and full as the human world.”

There is something emblematic about this, if one is trying to get to grips with Hefner’s multifarious personality. There’s the aspect of coming back to where you started; there’s also the aspect of polishing and curating your story even while it is still continuing and still branching into new fields. His has been a life lived publicly, but he is very private, too.

Self-made MeiLi

But MeiLi: I said this was about them, not just him. MeiLi is quite something. Over to her.

“I left Asia at the age of 15 with a few dollars in my pocket. I come from an old Chinese family; I was born in Singapore, but my parents were from China. All daughters in my family were to be married off well, but not educated. I wanted a different life.” Her parents were intent on finding her a husband, but she managed to convince them to let her do a secretarial course, after which she applied for a job—and got it—at the Mandarin Hotel, as secretary to the manager. At that point, she had to tell her parents. “My parents said no. They said they would disown me. So, I said okay. I had a contract for the job, so I rented a room. But no one from my family was allowed to be in touch with me.”

She learned English—which she reckoned was necessary if she was to have a career—via the Reader’s Digest. “I had a





subscription, and I would underline all the words I didn't know and look them up in the dictionary." She did an online PR course and became the youngest PR manager in Singapore. There was a lot of jealousy, she says. "It was a huge thing in Singapore then. Now, too. My parents used to get calls saying, 'You don't know what your daughter is doing; she's a prostitute.' Hotels then had a bad name."

Contact was eventually reestablished. Her then boss said, "Bring your parents here and show them." "So I did, and the calls stopped, because they would say, 'I'm happy with what my daughter is doing.'"

In time she was headhunted by The Dorchester in London, married an English banker, and lived all over the place—London, Nigeria, Portugal—divorced, set up her own PR and marketing company, and in due course came to London. "I wanted to go back to the hotel business; I had to get hotels out of my blood. I decided to sell my business and apply for a job in London. But I had been out of it for so long, and I didn't know the computer systems. They said I was overqualified, or they only did internal promotions"—and so on. She took a receptionist job on condition that she would be considered for the next management job that came up. And then she moved to The Mandarin Oriental doing guest relations, and then to the Berkeley, the Dorchester... "I worked seven days a week. I had a passion." She also has a few good stories, but they are not for repeating here.

Robert, meanwhile, was going to China. He went there first to analyze the country's natural-gas resources and ended up collecting modern Chinese oil paintings, which he says has been one of the greatest experiences of his life. His first visit was at the time of the Deng reforms, and he saw that they were unstoppable. In 300 BCE, he says, China was using natural gas for lighting and cooking, using bamboo pipes. By 680 CE, it was an industry, and by 1200–1300 the drilling rigs "were just like the ones I'd used," except that everything was made of bamboo.

"They had everything we had except diesel engines. Leonardo [da Vinci]'s notebooks have drilling rigs just like this. I wonder if a technology transfer from China to Italy might have sparked the Renaissance."

He is, you might infer, fascinated by China. Ask him now if he is still an optimist about the world, and he says, "I'm a globalist. It depends from what direction you look at it. From the Asian point of view, I'm optimistic."

Then the Berlin Wall came down, and he bought four large (9.5ft high by 7ft wide [3m x 2m]) chunks of it, the painted *Kings of Freedom* (by artist Dennis Kaun) on the western side symbolizing the power of personal freedom, and the bare numbers on bare concrete on the eastern side a stark contrast. This has been on public show at the University of Virginia, though the loan is now ending.

Biodiversity and Cabernet Franc

Time to go back to wine. By now, Robert and MeiLi are married. They had always drunk great wine, and when they asked the barman at Harry's Bar in London about wine, he suggested they come with him to Italy. There they met Soldera—and visited him every year afterward. And from Soldera came the introduction to Antonini and to Parra, who dug 50 soil pits and loved what he found.

The vineyards, when the Hefners bought it, were planted with Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Chardonnay, and Chambourcin. They were industrially farmed because that is the usual way in Virginia; conventional wisdom states that vinifera vines cannot be grown naturally in VA. As we've seen, Robert has no truck with conventional wisdom, and the phrase "but in Virginia..."

Above: (left) three stages of granite-gneiss mother-rock decomposition; (right) Pedro Parra in a soil pit he dug at Ramiiisol, with the winemaking consultant Alberto Antonini, Robert Hefner, and Robbie Corpora.

has been banned. "Nobody in Virginia is doing these things," says MeiLi. "They can't afford it. Nor can we, but it's a responsibility. We're custodians of the land."

The Merlot has been pulled out, as has the Chambourcin. They rather liked the Chardonnay, but it took three times the work of the Cabernet Franc and still succumbed to black rot. For a while they thought they would focus on Nebbiolo and Cabernet Franc, "but Gianfranco told us that it's hard enough to grow one vine, so why would you grow more than one?" says MeiLi. The Nebbiolo mostly didn't work, so most of it has gone, and the focus is on Cabernet Franc, with just a bit of Montepulciano for their pink "Cerasuolo."

Biodiversity is the key, they believe. "It should be possible to build a healthy microbiome in the soil," says Robert. "It's part of the evolution of immune systems. I'm convinced that, like everything else, alive vines can have an evolution of their immune systems. Immunity was put in place at every stage of life on earth, to protect. It's kind of use it or lose it. We had Nebbiolo for less than five years, and it might have turned the corner. But we downsized. We might end up with just 12 acres [5ha] of vines and concentrate on making some of the most wonderful Cabernet Franc in the world."

But there won't be just 12 acres. More has been planted, and when that is all in full production, in four years or so, production will get to about 20,000 bottles. The wines are poised, tense, very silky, very elegant. They are a credit to their mentor, Soldera.

They're also experimenting with planting seeds of Cabernet Franc, putting bags on the flowers to ensure that there's no pollination from the wild vines that fill the surrounding forest. It is, says Robbie, "not from the idea of making a new vineyard from seed, but if we could get grapes from one of these new vines, we might get a really suitable vine that is still vinifera." They tried it in 2020 but lost them to weeds, hail, and Japanese beetles.

The point is that gas, energy, geology, biodiversity, and soil microfungi are all combined in the Hefners' complete determination to make this small-scale, extravagant, unlikely project work. In 1987, he was quoted in *Southwest Art* magazine: "I really believe that my work [exploration geologist and geophysicist] is, to a great extent, a blend of art and science. Just like the artists who approached their canvases from a scientific viewpoint—the great pointillist Seurat who studied color scientifically, for instance—I think that any good explorationist takes bits and pieces of all the various sciences and with that information blends a picture of nature below the surface of the earth. That's really an art, because we'll never see that science—it's our conception of nature, and any conception of nature is, in fact, art."

And today he says, "There are two energy systems that sustain humans constantly. One is the energy system to run ourselves: food. The other is the energy to run everything we've ever created or built. We have industrialized the agricultural system since the Industrial Revolution, and we've industrialized the economic system. It started with the origin of civilization, with fire. I believe both systems have failed."

"There are 8 billion people now, without regard to nature, running everything on two energy systems that are not sustainable. Something will change, and that will create huge opportunities for those who are part of it. The work we're doing with Merlin Sheldrake on soil, which is the biggest carbon sink there is—if we can direct that to use more carbon..."

You could see Ramiiisol as just another venture, another idea, in lives that have ranged across disciplines and across continents. Or you could see it as a pinprick on the surface of the Earth in which all those disciplines come together in order, just possibly, to start a chain reaction. Like this piece, everything has to start somewhere. ■