

Technical Spotlight: Eden Estate Wines

From Silicon Valley Back to the
Valley of the Heart's Delight

Stacy Briscoe



PHOTOS ADAM DECKER

FULL DISCLOSURE: THIS TECHNICAL Spotlight isn't that technical, though it takes place in the heart of Silicon Valley—or, as it was known pre-tech boom: The Valley of the Heart's Delight.

John Couch, proprietor of **Eden Estate Wines**, was not always in the wine business. Until about four years ago, Couch was a Silicon Valley stereotype: an employee of **Apple**. He wasn't just any employee: in 1978 Couch was hired by **Steve Jobs** as the 54th employee of Apple, and in 1979 he became the company's first vice president of software. In 2002 Couch was named the vice president of education—a role created just for him—and stayed in that role until his retirement in 2015.

When Couch finally retired, and his professional and personal life changed, he decided to take what was once a small hobby—grapegrowing and winemaking—and turn it into a second career. Couch bought his 20-acre parcel in 2009. The property is located in Saratoga, Calif., at the foothills of Mount Eden—an area famed for its historic vineyards that date back to the Gold Rush Era, as well as the world-class wines produced by **Ridge Vineyards**, **Katherine Kennedy Winery** and the aptly named **Mt. Eden Winery**.

But the property itself is in the midst of a residential neighborhood. At just an 800-foot elevation, Eden Estate is at the outer limits of what's considered the Santa Cruz Mountain appellation. Save for a few modest signs at the

Key Points

- Former Apple executive transforms a horse ranch into a winery and event venue
- Veteran winemaker Bill Brosseau brings organic farming expertise, supporting vine health while increasing quality and yield
- Winemaking combines high-tech equipment with hands-off techniques

Stacy Briscoe is the assistant editor of *Wine Business Monthly*. She has been writing about wine professionally since 2015, freelancing for multiple publications including *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Edible Communities* and *Napa Sonoma Magazine*, among others. She also maintains her own website, *BriscoeBites.com*, dedicated to wine reviews and tasting notes. Outside of wine writing, she also contributes as a freelance editor for the independent publisher She Writes Press. Stacy has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English-language literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz.





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L TO R: Bill Brosseau, winemaker and John Couch, proprietor at Eden Estate Wines

bottom of the driveway, one would assume the winery is another mansion hidden in the expansive hills.

"It was basically poison oak and shrub," said Couch, remembering the state of the property when he bought it 10 years ago. "There was an older house on it and a metal barn."

The property did have a few vines planted around the perimeter of the property, and Couch said he'd been making wine from the grapes as a hobby, sharing it with friends and family. "People liked the wine, so it seemed only natural to expand on it," he said. So, he turned the barn into the barrel room, the grooms' house into the guest house and planted the stables to vines.

Today, the estate consists of a 4,100-square-foot winery, a stone and pine carousel gazebo to host by-appointment guests and parties, a guest cottage, Couch's home and 3 acres of estate Cabernet Sauvignon, all beautifully landscaped as a Tuscan villa—a nod to Couch's heritage and love for the culture's family-style attitude toward wine, food and communal gatherings.

In 2014 Couch pulled his first estate-grown harvest, which yielded just 9.9 tons, a 142-case production. But he didn't start selling his wines until 2018 and, though not "officially" until this year. "We had a 2019 inaugural release event in August—a bit of a 'coming out party,'" he said.

The 2019 harvest promises an increase in yield, case production and sales, and there are presently approximately 1.5 more acres of vines being planted throughout the estate. Couch insists, however, he wants to maintain his boutique status: "I don't want a huge production. I just want nice quality wine," he said, predicting a still-modest 700 case production run for 2019—but a significant increase from the 450 cases in 2018.

Vineyard Reboot

When Couch began his initial landscaping project, he conducted minor initial soil testing. "But it was pretty obvious to me without testing that this area was prime for Cab," he said. "The ground is pretty hard and hardy, so it didn't take an expert to learn that Cab was the best bet."

Of course, Couch couldn't do it alone. He hired a local vineyard management company to help his on site vineyard manager, **Jesus Garcia**. When he decided to get serious about his grapegrowing and winemaking as a business prospect, he knew he had to look for a dedicated expert to truly finesse his vineyard and create the quality wines the area is capable of.

"I asked around to **Peter Armellino**," said Couch, referring to his friend, owner and head chef of the former **Michelin**-starred restaurant, **Plumed Horse**. "I asked a number of sommelier friends as well: 'Where can I find a good winemaker?' They all gave me Bill's name."

He's talking about **Bill Brosseau**—a nearly 20-year winemaking veteran for **Testarossa Winery** in Los Gatos and a graduate of the **UC Davis** Department of Viticulture and Enology. Brosseau also farms other properties in the South Bay and recently launched his own wine brand, **Brosseau Wines**, from his family's estate in Monterey County.

"I told him I want to do a top-notch Cab, on the level of **Katherine Kennedy**—my favorite. And I think he saw the potential of the facility and the land," Couch said.

When initially approached by Armellino, Brosseau was hesitant. "I don't usually work with the smaller vineyards," he said. But when he visited the estate in person, he couldn't turn away. "I enjoyed John's energy and quest for quality. And all the pieces were here: the facility was here, the potential in the vineyard was here, Jesus was here. And John doesn't just want to make wine but wants to be in that category with Katherine Kennedy and Ridge." This was a project—a challenge—Brosseau was keen to take on.

A challenge it was. "The past farming company, I got the impression that they were less and less involved and just leaving a lot of challenges for Jesus, and he was getting frustrated. So when I came on, I said, 'We gotta fixer up,'" Brosseau said.

From Conventional to Organic

Strolling through the vineyard, one can see how each vine is neatly trimmed to expose ripening Cabernet Sauvignon grapes to the South Bay sun. Nets gently hug maturing fruit, keeping them from dropping before their harvest date and protecting them from natural predators. Every inch of every acre looks tended to and cared for.

“When I came on...you’d have cordons with really big gaps, places where the thinning or pruning wasn’t done right. You’d have one really big vine next to a really little one. It was like a musical instrument that was extremely out of tune,” Brosseau said.

The 2015 harvest was an extremely modest one, as this was the growing season when Brosseau, Garcia and Couch decided to “reset” the vineyard. “We threw a lot of fruit away because the quality just wasn’t there,” Couch said. “We did aggressive pruning and really tried to even out the vigor so there was as little vine-to-vine variation as possible.” That year was the most meager harvest thus far for Eden Estate—2.69 tons, just 59 cases.

The biggest change Brosseau brought to Eden Estate: organic farming. According to both Couch and Brosseau, since making the transition from conventional to organic farming, the yields have increased year after year.

“You get a really nice bloom and color, I feel, on the fruit when you farm organically,” Brosseau said. “With conventional farming, the vine is just so strong that the fruit doesn’t physiologically keep up.” That was what was happening all across Couch’s property—over-rigorous leafing combined with poor maintenance routines meant that the grapes had been ripening somewhat unevenly, and not producing wines to their full potential.

Brosseau said he farms organically on other properties, including his family’s ranch, which is certified. Eden Estate is not yet certified organic, though it has gone through the three-year detox needed to qualify for the certification. “It’s something that we’ll discuss and see. The big part was getting John and Jesus excited about it,” he said.

Fortunately, Brosseau added, when the previous vineyard management company laid out the vineyard, they did it “really well,” in his opinion. “They didn’t just do big long rows or overrun the surfaces—they actually chopped it up quite nicely,” he said. Though, he added, the spacing between rows is a little wider than necessary as it was originally planned for tractors and other big pieces of vineyard equipment to pass through. But today, everything on Eden Estate is maintained and harvested by hand.

Thus, the new acreage being planted along the hillier aspects of the property will be closer together. “Because we’re on a steep hill, we can go tighter and still get good sunlight,” Brosseau said.

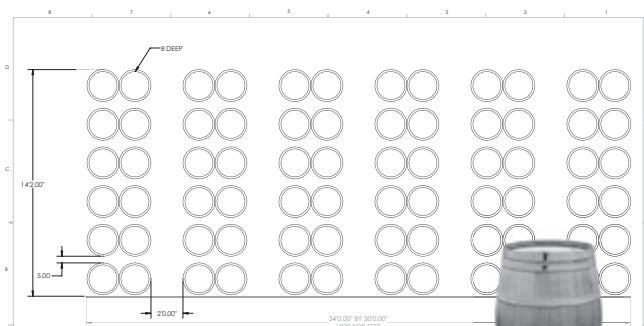
Brosseau also mentioned the newer plantings will be more clonal specific than those planted in the lower elevations. “The soil type up there is a different complex...it’s looser than the clay down lower, which can get cement-like,” he said. “The challenge is how to assess the soil and lay out the vineyard in a way that we can achieve quality without a lot of effort.”

He still calls the estate vineyard “very forgiving terroir,” as far as growing Cabernet Sauvignon. “We’re situated in a valley; so when the sun goes down over the mountain, it cools really fast. We have the richness of Napa Valley because of the clay soils, but then we have this fruit intensity that Napa just doesn’t get because it stays so warm at night. We cool down. We have the acidity, the richness and the fruitiness—that’s really rare in a California Cab,” he said.

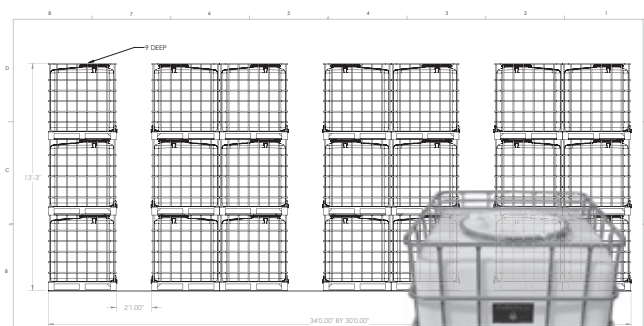




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Technical Spotlight: Eden Estate Wines

Eden Estate Wines

22090 Mt. Eden Rd., Saratoga, California 95070

408-868-9500	www.Edenestateswines.com
Owners/Principals	John Couch, proprietor
Winemaker	Bill Brosseau
Vineyard Manager	Jesus Garcia
Year Bonded	2017
Winery Case Production	450
Average Bottle Price	\$60
Direct-to-Consumer Sales	80%

Vineyard Information

Appellation	Santa Cruz Mountains
Vineyard Acreage	3
Varieties Grown	Cabernet Sauvignon
Tons Used vs. Tons Sold	100% used for Estate
Sustainability Certification(s)	none
Sustainability Practices	Organically farmed since 2015
Soil Type	Varying degrees of heavy clay and clay loam; some pockets of limestone: Block 1: Montavista-Togasara Complex, Block 2 and 3: Literr-Merbeth Complex, Blocks 4-8: Literr-Urbanland-Merbeth Complex
Climate	Region 2
Additional Varieties Purchased	Chardonnay
Vineyard Sourcing	Tally Family, Monte Sereno Arroyo Grande AVA

Building the Winery

Year Built	2010-2017
Size	4,100 square feet
Architect	Chris Spaulding, csarchitect.net
Contractor	Dan Boyd
Interior Design	Tara Gallagher Couch
Landscape Architect	David Fox, landfx.com

Winemaking

Harvest at Eden Estates takes place between mid- and late-October, a relief for Brosseau who is otherwise “drowning in Pinot Noir” for other projects he’s involved in earlier in the season.

The production facility is no fancy outfit. “All the magic happens outside,” Brosseau said, standing in what looks to be an extension of the driveway. But as low-tech as the setting may be, the winery equipment is comprised of the latest models and technologies available.

“We have all this technology not to overhandle the fruit, but to protect and preserve it,” Brosseau said. “I got into winemaking because I didn’t want to go high-tech. I’m kind of a slow processor. I don’t like the whole idea of the speed of high tech—it’s ironic that I’m working in Silicon Valley.”

He continued, “The more I’ve been a winemaker the less I’ve leaned on data. On this scale...instincts just really kick in each year. We’re already doing so great with so few years in—it can only get better and better as we really dial it in.”

The model, Brosseau and Couch agreed, is to grow the grapes organically and showcase essence of the vineyard and not get “too techie” in the wine-making process. “The more we handle the product, the more we take away from that essence,” Brosseau said.

Winemaking

Wines Made	Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon and Rosé of Cabernet Sauvignon
Vibrating Sorting Table	Delta TRV 35 vibrating table Bucher Vaslin; buchervaslin.com
Destemmer	Delta 300 mobile belt elevator feeds Delta Oscillys 100 destemmer Bucher Vaslin; buchervaslin.com
Tanks	Ranging 350 to 1000 gallons; Custom Metal Craft; custom-metalcraft.com 120 to 240 gallons; FlexTan; flectankusa.com
Tank Heating/Chilling Systems	G&D Portable Glycol Chiller/Heater Fire and Ice 7 HP/12.5 kW G&D Chillers; gdchillers.com
Punchdown Devices	by hand
Pumps	Waukesha Cherry-Burrell rotary positive displacement pumps Waukesha Cherry-Burrell; spxflow.com
Racking Wands	Rack-it-Teer; rackitteer.com
Presses	Bucher Vaslin JLB 12 basket press for reds; buchervaslin.com Euro-Machines P52 Europress open style membrane press for whites and rose. Euro-Machines; euromachinesusa.com
Forklift	Toyota propane forklift 8FGU25 with pneumatic tires; toyotaforklift.com
Bin Dumper	Malavac Lift-Master; liftmasterbindumper.com
Pallet Truck	Raymond 8410 end rider pallet truck; raymondcorp.com
Barrels	30 and 60 gallon French oak
Cooperages	François Frères; francoisfreres.com Cooperage Demptos; demptos.fr Taransaud; www.taransaud.com Nadalié USA; nadalié.com Tonnellerie de Mercurey; tonnellerie-de-mercurey.com Seguin Moreau Napa Cooperage; seguinmoreaunapa.com
Barrel Washing System	Poseidon 7-67 by Aqua Tools; aquatools.com
Yeast/Nutrients/Enzymes/Other Additions	BDX yeast, Nutristart O for micronutrients
Filters	Velo plate and frame
Winemaking Management System	Boutique winery with copious notes/lists
Winemaking Software	None
Analytical Equipment	Thermo handheld pH/ ISE/conductivity/ DO, R&D AO and VA cash still
LDS electric ebulliometer	

Packaging

Bottling Line	Top It off Bottling; topitoffbottling.com
Glass	Ardagh 6189 (ed wine); ardaghgroup.com Saxco 2404 flint for Rosé; saxco.com
Corks	Cork Supply DS100 49X24 top, 10% sort alpha wash; corksupply.com
Capsules	Rivercap tin; rivercap.com
Label Design	Kris and John Couch
Label Printing	Landmark Label; landmarklabel.com
POS Software	None
Case Goods Storage	In-house

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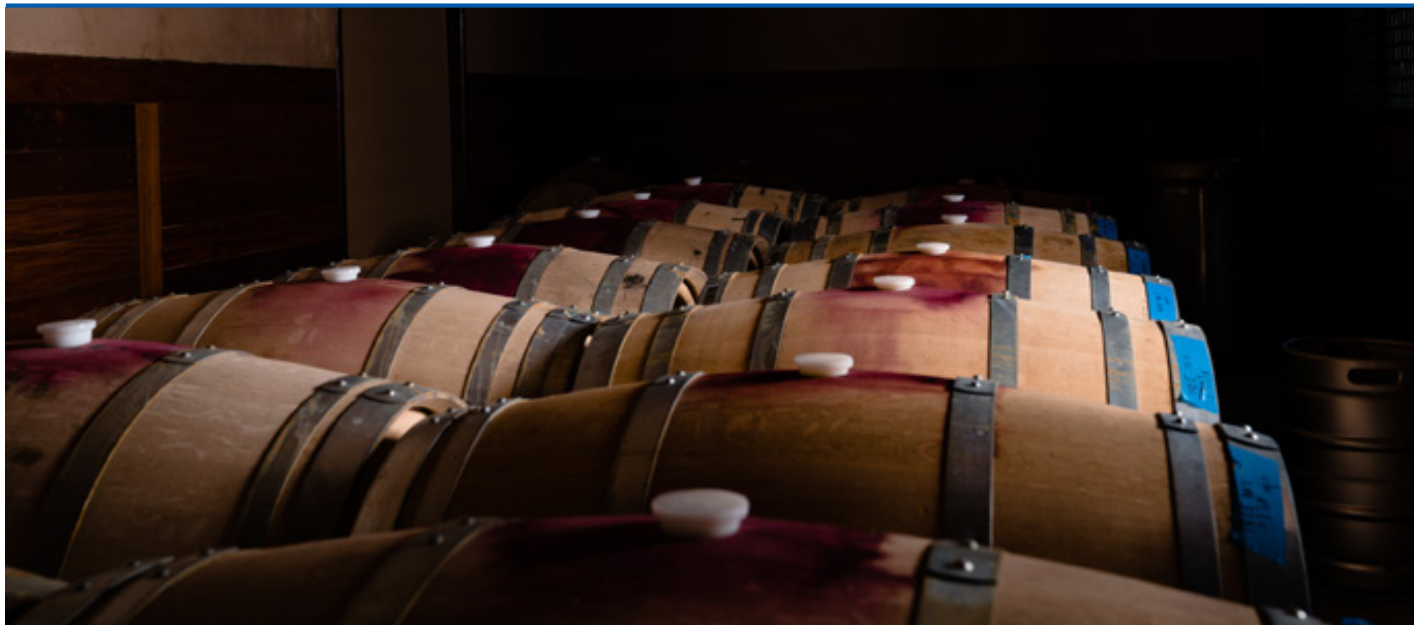
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All grapes are hand-picked and hand-sorted on the **Bucher Vaslin** Delta TRV 35 vibrating table. The grapes are fed into the Delta Oscillys 100 destemmer via the Delta TR 300 mobile belt elevator. The berries remain intact—no crushing. Most importantly, according to Brosseau, all lots are kept separate from picking bin until the final blending process. “I can tell on the sorting table sometimes which bins need to stay away from each other and which may work well together,” he said, noting that he tastes every vessel and even does some mental “pre-blending” during these first stages.

The grapes stay in the 1-ton plastic bins for initial fermentation and are kept on the skins based on taste—meaning until Brosseau can taste “a finish.” “As it finishes ferment, it lingers to the back of the palate, and that’s when I’ll drain from the skins. So, there’s no ‘exact days on skin,’ per se; it’s all done by taste.”

Brosseau said he simply leaves the grapes out in the sun and may use a **G&D** portable glycol heating unit if it starts to cool down too much. The fermenting fruit undergoes semi-regular punch-downs, conducted by Brosseau and Garcia, again based on taste. “They’re small bins, so we’re not afraid of the tannins,” Brosseau said.

As an advocate for organic, Brosseau hopes to eventually move toward native fermentation. But as the site and facility are so young, and it does get quite cool, he worries about sluggish fermentation and inoculates with **BDX** yeast and **Nutristart O** for micronutrients. “I want the highest potential right out the gate. I knew organic farming, for me, would be a piece of cake. On the winery side, I want to be a touch cautious so we can really get it right. Then we can ease off and try going native,” Brosseau said.

When each bin tastes complete and “at its best,” it’s then drained and settled in tank for “a few days” then put to barrel to be clarified. The remaining is run through the **Bucher Vaslin** JLB 12 basket press and is barrel-aged separately. “It’s a symphony of barrels,” Brosseau said. “If we can get them to play well by themselves when we go to blend, they can harmonize and make a better expression.”

Eden Estate uses a variety of cooperages, including **François Frères USA**, **Demptos Napa Cooperage**, **Tonnellerie Taransaud**, **Nadalié USA**, **Tonnellerie de Mercurey** and **Seguin Moreau Napa Cooperage**. The Cabernet Sauvignon ages in about 75 percent new French oak, which Brosseau lightly soaks with dechlorinated water to “take the edge off.” The wine stays in the same barrel for the entirety of its aging, which is about two to two-and-a-half years. “I tend to think you get more subtlety and nuance,” Brosseau said.

Brosseau prefers a medium toast on his barrels. “If you farm well, you can use lighter toast and really accentuate good structure and aroma. To me, the oak and the vineyard have to work well together,” he said. “It’s nice because this is a site where there’s not much to do—we’re getting great ripeness and 24° and 25° Brix. The climate, soil and farming all lands in a good spot, so you don’t have to do much.”

When it comes to the blending process, grapes and wine from the highest-quality blocks are destined for the reserve bottling, though the best blocks may change from year to year. Brosseau said that, over time, he may eventually move to separate block bottlings if the individual plantings begin to assert a “specific personality.”

Eden Estate currently produces two bottlings of Cabernet Sauvignon: a reserve and an estate. “I think these wines, as the vines get older, they’re just going to be aging really, really well. I want them to drink well young, but for people that want to lay them down, they’ll deliver,” Brosseau said.

Rosés for Mom

Eden Estates currently produces one bottling of Rosé of Cabernet Sauvignon—a wine that Couch has no shame in sharing is his mother’s favorite and is produced just for her.

Couch also admitted that he, in general, isn’t actually a fan of the wine style. “When Bill approached me about making a Rosé, I wasn’t sold...I don’t like those sweet Rosés,” he said. However, in keeping with the “essence” of the vineyard, that is not the style Brosseau had in mind, nor the one he produces. The light-colored Rosé wine is crisp with clean acidity, aromatic with classic red fruit flavors, but neither dense on the palate nor heavy in body.

Cabernet Sauvignon grapes for the Rosé program are selected from specific blocks in the vineyard that Brosseau and Garcia can tell won’t get the pigment or fruit intensity needed for their top-tier Cabernet Sauvignon red wines.

Hand-harvested and hand-sorted, these grapes will go through the **Euro-Machines** Europress, P52 open-style membrane press whole cluster. “I tend to do more of a Champagne-style press: real slow, gentle, so as not to get a lot of phenolic extraction,” Brosseau said.

Once separated from the skins, the juice is chilled and left to settle in stainless steel tanks for about one year. “Zero oak here. There are already plenty of tannins in Cab,” Brosseau said.

Woz Wine (AKA Chardonnay)

For all intents and purposes, Couch is not a huge fan of white wines. “Except Bordeaux whites. It would be fun to one day make a Bordeaux-style white,” Couch mused.

But, as is his nature, Couch thrives on making wines for family and friends. In the case of the 2019 Chardonnay, this was a special request from close friend and colleague **Steve Wozniak**, who, according to Couch, took part in the processing when the fruit came in mid-September.

As the Eden Estate vines are completely dedicated to Cabernet Sauvignon, Couch and Brosseau sourced about 3 tons of Chardonnay grapes from a vineyard in Monte Sereno managed by the **Tally** family. This is the first year the Eden Estate team is producing a Chardonnay, so the specifics surrounding the winemaking are currently being established. But what is clear is the style of wine Couch wants to create: a clean, crisp Chardonnay, more akin to the style of Chablis than the classic California format. Couch predicts a 150-case production of “Woz Wine.”

Packaging

All wines are bottled on-site using the **Top it Off Bottling** mobile bottling service. The label and package design were created by Couch’s son, **Kris Couch**. The owl is a reference to the family of owls found in the barn during construction and that still live along the property today, taking advantage of the numerous owl boxes Couch has installed.

Wines are sold 80 percent direct-to-consumer, via the winery website and through the by-appointment tastings held once a week at the estate. There is no wine club: “Why not just treat everybody the same?” Couch asked. There is a mailing list consumers can join where they’ll be alerted about special events taking place on the property.

The rest of the wine is sold through local restaurants, including Armellino’s second restaurant, **Pasta Armellino**, and Couch’s brother’s restaurant **Market Broiler** in Fremont. Couch has said a few others have shown interest in potentially selling his wine as well.

The Vision

To talk to Couch, it’s not about the dollars, sales or profit. “If people are interested in my wine and appreciate my wine, then, yeah they can sell it,”

he said. “But if someone wants to buy it and then sell it at a crazy mark-up, I don’t want to be a part of that.”

According to Couch, the value he finds in his new profession is both the ability to cater to existing friends and family, as well as the opportunities it has opened up for him to meet new people and expand that social circle—again harkening to that feeling of communal gathering he sought to create in constructing this South Bay villa.

“One of the things that I learned at Apple in the early days is to think about your ‘why.’ To me that means ‘What is your vision for what you’re doing?’” Couch said. “The joy of drinking wine...that’s my why. I enjoy seeing people be joyful and that’s what drives the production and what we do.” **WBM**



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