

GRACIOUS LIVING

How one woman's love for food, wine, art, and Robert Mondavi helped Napa Valley transform from a farming community to a bucolic cultural capital.

BY STEPHANIE WILSON



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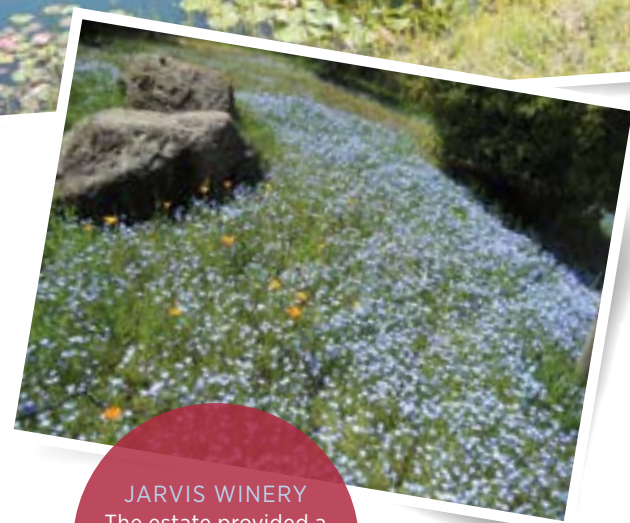
“THE MORE GOOD WINE THAT COMES OUT OF NAPA VALLEY, THE BETTER FOR EVERYONE.”

“If you could choose anywhere in the world you would want to be today, you would want to be here. This is the place to be,” says Margrit Biever Mondavi. She and I are sitting by a lake on the sprawling Jarvis Winery estate, set high in the hills between Mount George and Milliken Canyon at the southeastern end of the Napa Valley. It’s 10:30 am on the first Friday in June, which means it’s Day Two of Auction Napa Valley, the Napa Valley Vintners annual four-day fundraiser that’s known as the world’s most celebrated charity wine auction. “It’s such a symbiotic thing. Here, we can show you our great wines, we can show you a wonderful time, and at the same time, look what we are doing, we’re helping the community.”

The gathering began last night with private dinner parties throughout the valley. Today, more than 2,000 oenophiles from near and far will ascend to Jarvis for the marketplace, barrel auction, and e-auction showcase—the largest of the weekend’s events. This evening, Margrit will host an intimate dinner at the winery founded by her late husband, the legendary Robert Mondavi. It’s all a precursor to the main event: Saturday’s Live Auction. The wine-making elite and their well-heeled fans will gather at Meadowood Resort to bid on the incredible auction lots put together by vintners and bid on mostly by other

vintners, all for the greater good. Since it began in 1981, Auction Napa Valley has raised more than \$100 million for area health, youth, and affordable housing programs. As Margrit and I enjoy a moment of respite in the warm late-spring morning, she explains that when she and her husband first brought the idea of the auction to the Napa Valley Vintners 32 years ago, it was almost dismissed as “another one of Robert Mondavi’s crazy ideas.”

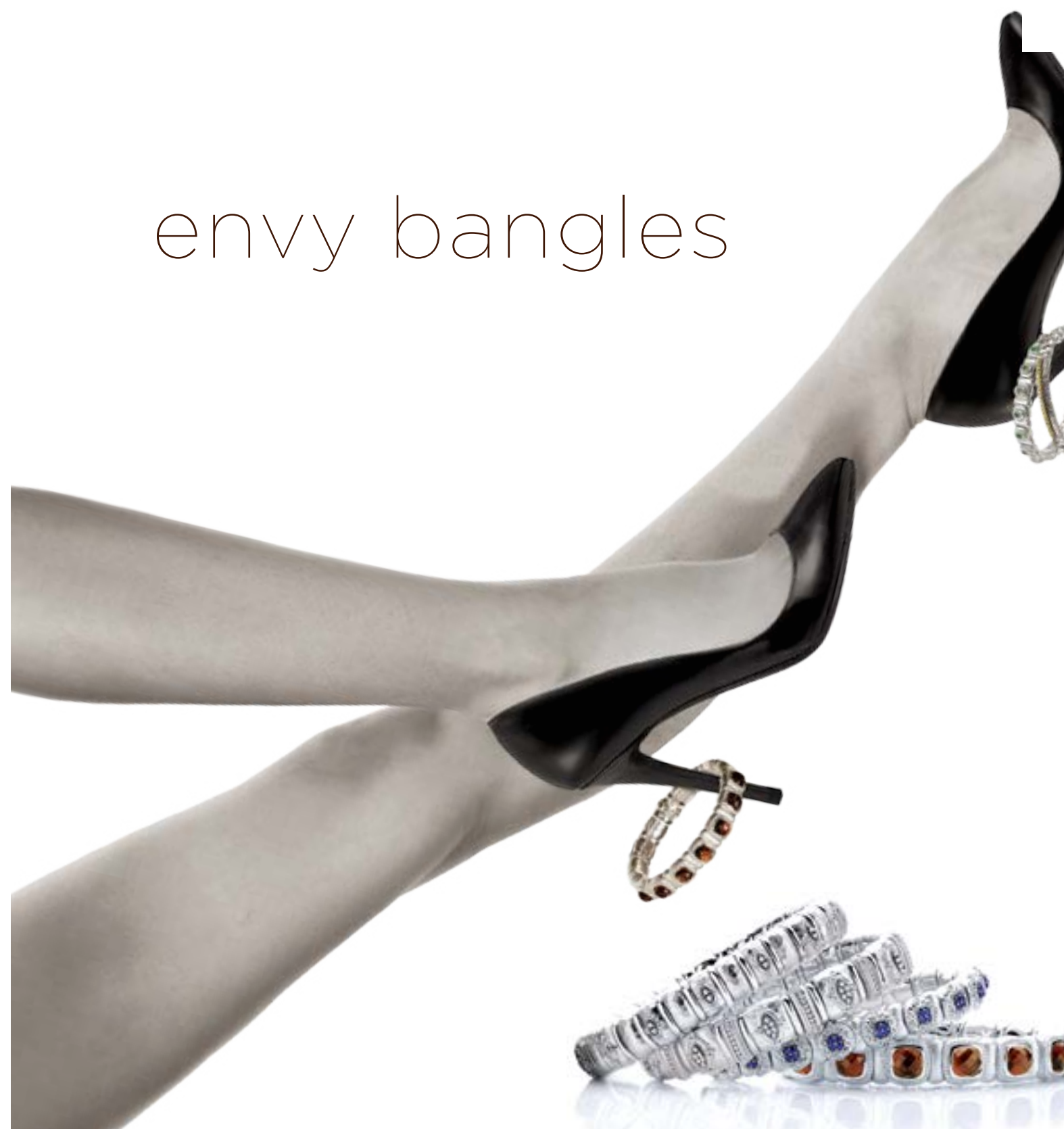
As another San Francisco Bay area visionary taught us, the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do. Robert Mondavi did indeed *think different* about California wine, about company, partnerships, community, and cuisine. In turn, Margrit taught him to think different about the arts, culture, and hospitality. By uniting their passions, the Mondavis changed the way the world perceived wine from California, while simultaneously altering how Napa Valley winemakers saw the world. Together, they were the catalyst that transformed a small farming community into one of the country’s most treasured cultural capitals.



JARVIS WINERY
The estate provided a picturesque setting for Auction Napa Valley’s Marketplace.

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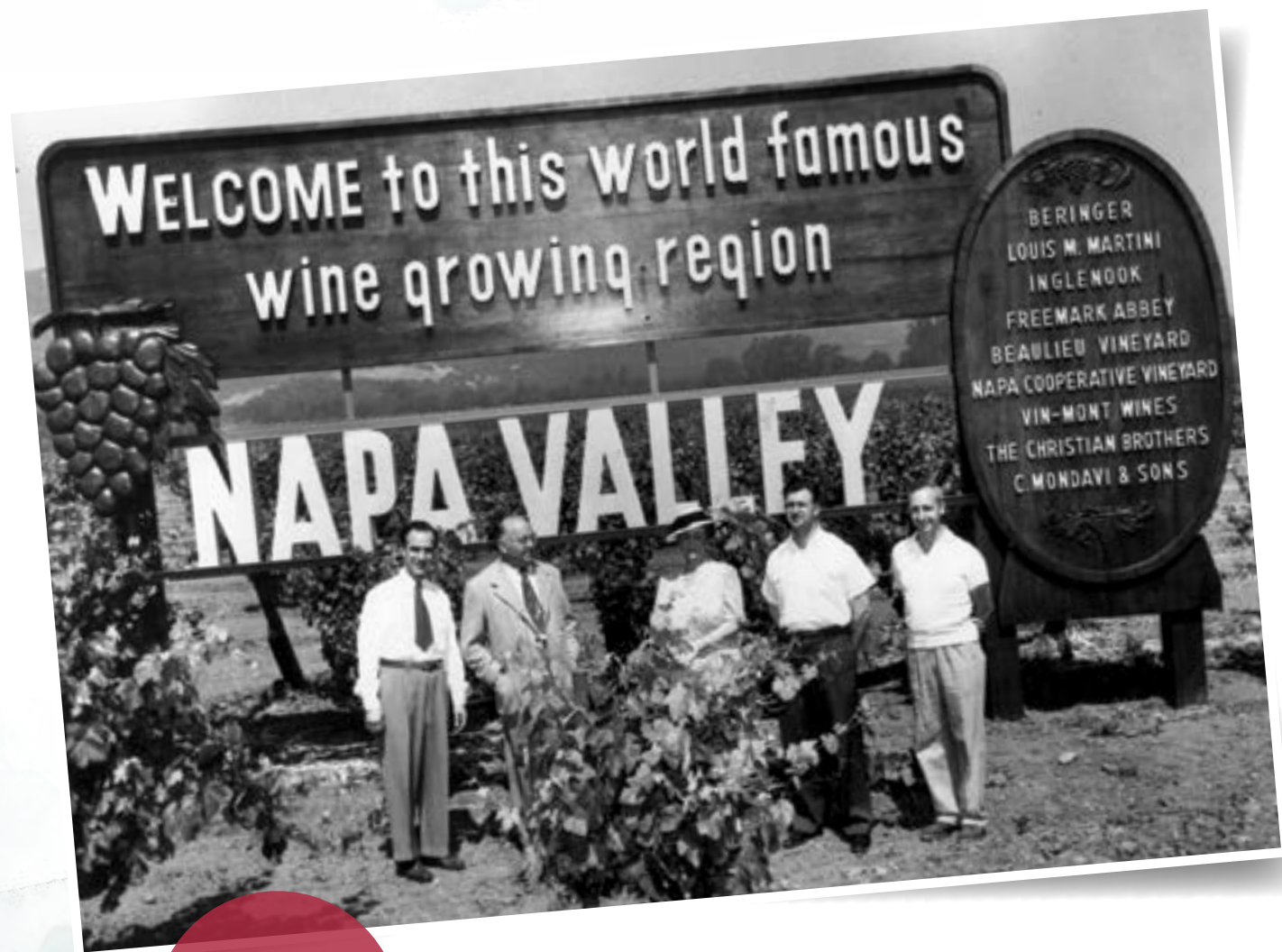
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THE ROOTS
Robert Mondavi (left)
with pioneering Napa
Valley vintners.

Just one generation ago, it was a different story in Napa Valley, if not a very different landscape. The valley's wine-making history dates to 1838, and the first commercial winery was established by Charles Krug in 1861. (The Krug winery was later purchased by the Mondavi family.) By 1889, over 140 wineries dotted the valley. However, the Great Depression following on the heels of Prohibition, World War I, and an infestation of grapevine-killing insects reduced the region's once-thriving wine industry to just a handful of vintners by the end of World War II.

In 1944, recognizing the challenges that lay ahead, a group of seven local leaders and winemakers formed the Napa Valley Vintners, "with the idea that they were stronger together than individually," according to NVV literature. Robert Mondavi, representing Krug, was among the

founding group.

That ethos—stronger together—became a way of life for Robert. During his frequent travels to the wine-making capitals of Europe, he would meet with the local winemakers, tour the vineyards and cellars, examine the equipment, and taste the wines. "By and by, he realized that this *terroir* could produce fine wines—he never said *better than* but he said *in the company of* the great wines of the world," says Margrit. Inspired by his travels, Robert opened his namesake Robert Mondavi Winery on Highway 29 in Oakville, California, in 1966—the first new winery to open in Napa Valley after the end of Prohibition. He was 53 years old.

Margrit joined the team at Robert Mondavi Winery in 1967 as a tour guide. Soon enough, she was leading the department, expanding the tours and outreach programs. She had no formal training in public relations or

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STRONGER TOGETHER
Robert and Margrit sit under the arch at Robert Mondavi Winery.



MARGRIT MONDAVI'S SKETCHBOOK

Reflections on Wine, Food, Art, Family, Romance, and Life

"She lives in style but her tastes remain simple, and her capacity for relishing the dawn of each day should inspire us all." Thus concludes author Janet Fletcher's prologue of *Margrit Mondavi's Sketchbook: Reflections on Wine, Food, Art, Family, Romance, and Life*, a book that Fletcher helped shape from the diaries Margrit has religiously kept for the past 65 years. The elegant 147-page, hardbound book is filled with Margrit's reflections on various events in her life, told in her signature open style. Throughout the book, Margrit's personal photos, sketches, and watercolors bring her candid words to life. What's most special, however, are the personal reflections from Margrit's friends and family, which paint a vivid picture of Margrit's character: "She is nourished by beauty." Arlene Burnstein. "I don't think she changed my father. She added to him. They improved life for each other." Tim Mondavi. "She is not on earth to be bored. She's on earth to laugh and make everybody happy. She has a sort of magic and a way of bringing everybody into the conversation." Genevieve Janssens. "Margrit is defined by her exuberant interest in life and food and wine and beauty in all its manifestations—in fashion, music, and art....You feel more alive in her presence." Eleanor Coppola. "At an age when many people joke about not buying green bananas, Margrit is learning Russian, taking painting classes, and buying cookbooks. She has become, for me, a model of how to live and how to age." Janet Fletcher.

marketing; her father insisted that she attend finishing school on Lake Geneva in her native Switzerland rather than go to college. It was there that she learned Latin and French, later adding German, Spanish, and, of course, English to her repertoire. (At 87 years old, she's currently studying Russian.)

An artist by nature, Margrit soon introduced the winery's art program, inviting painters, sculptors, and photographers to display their work. The tradition continues today. In 1969, she organized the first summer concert, which she says she put together "grassroots-style," personally transporting borrowed chairs to the winery in her Volkswagen Bus. That first concert raised \$1,200, which she parlayed into a celebrated concert series that is now in its fourth decade. Over the years, legendary artists like Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, Mel Tormé, Ray Charles, Natalie Cole, and others have taken to the open-air stage set at the edge of the To Kalon vineyard. For 27 years, they never advertised a concert or the wine—but news about Robert Mondavi Winery made its way through the grapevine, so to speak, inspiring other local vineyards to follow suit.

"With his signature enthusiasm, Robert portrayed his passion and also his generosity," Margrit says.

Other local vintners often sought his valuable advice. "People would say [to Robert], oh, that's competition. But he would say no. The more good wine that comes out of Napa Valley, the better for everyone. And so if somebody needed two cases of grapes—of course. If they needed a truck, if they needed to crush grapes, if they needed money. He was always there to encourage everybody and that has never been forgotten."

Auction Napa Valley gave Robert a chance to show the world that wines from Napa Valley could be considered among the world's best. The first year, Margrit explains, they put the auction together in a homespun kind of way, drumming up support and donations from the local community and raising \$140,000. That tradition continues today, albeit on a larger scale. Of the Napa Valley Vintners' 430 members, 360 were specifically involved in at least one part of Auction Napa Valley 2012—a tribute to the vision of the founding members. "As Bob always said, it brings us together. Good company, good wine, good food: it brings us together."

Wine, art, and music came together perfectly at the vintner-hosted dinner party I attended on Thursday evening, An Intimate Evening with Blackbird Vineyards at Ma(i)sonry Napa Valley in Yountville. Before dinner, we strolled through

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AUCTION NAPA VALLEY 2012
 Clockwise from top:
 Ma(i)sonry dinner; Live Auction at Meadowood; 1960 Jaguar XK 150-S roadster, part of a Live Auction lot; Blackbird Vineyards wines.



Ma(i)sonry's sculpture garden and perused the art, design, and furnishings gallery. Dinner, prepared by the chefs of Mandarin Oriental San Francisco, was served on three long wooden tables set underneath century-old olive trees, each course expertly paired with Blackbird vintages. Once guests settled into their seats, host Michael Polenske, a self-described recovering banker turned winery and gallery proprietor, revealed a twist on the typical pairing dinner: each course would also be matched with the musical stylings of singers-songwriters Anna Wilson and Monty Powell. Between courses, the duo perched on stools at the end of the table and serenaded guests with songs that perfectly captured the essence of the evening—songs like "Days Go By" and "These Are the Days," feel-good anthems written by Powell and made famous by country superstar Keith Urban.

Saturday's Live Auction was certainly a day to remember. The daylong event began with a preview of some of the mega-lots up for auction, one of which included a 12-day African safari represented by Tango, a live cheetah perched on a rock off the resort's croquet lawn. Following a picnic-style lunch of fried chicken by Thomas Keller's crew from Ad Hoc, the fashionable crowd gathered under the big tent for the spirited live auction. As fine wine flowed at all of the vintner-hosted tables, auctioneers tempted and teased the crowd with the incredible auction lots that were up for grabs. In addition to incredible bottles of rare or limited-edition wines, many of the lots promised once-in-a-lifetime experiences, such as the chance to participate as a guest racer at one of the San Francisco America's Cup races or to host a private, 28-person acoustic concert

featuring Lady Antebellum at the Napa Valley Reserve. The current of excitement running through the room grew with each burst of colorful confetti that floated down with every winning bid—even the impromptu ones, such as star chef Emeril Lagasse selling the shirt off his back for \$9,000. The friendly competition is for the greater good of all involved, as it not only supports the community, it brings everyone together to celebrate the fruits of their labors. In total, the four-day event raised more than \$8 million for local programs.

After the last lot was claimed, the party moved back out to the lawn for dinner prepared by Emeril himself, followed by dancing. As the last rays of the day's sun cast a warm glow over the lawn at Meadowood Napa Valley, a full moon rose in spectacular fashion, stealing the glory from the twilight. It was one of those moons that you typically only see in pictures: a giant white orb casting enough light that the thinning crowd could have continued their barefoot dancing on the lawn well into the night. As Margrit made her way toward the terraced grass stairs that led up to the club house and the resort's exit beyond, she stopped to say her good-byes to the friends and neighbors she passed along the way. When she came to me, she clutched my hand and smiled in her gracious way. As I began to wish her well, she squeezed my hand and said, "Keep shining, you gorgeous girl." As she made her way back out into the world, I turned and joined the crowd on the dance floor, where I did as I was told. There was nowhere else in the world I wanted to be. ♡

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