

GOOD VITIS™

SPECIAL EDITION . , CALIFORNIA GRAPES



Spring/Summer 2024

Special Edition: California Grapes

This spring, one of my best friends and I spent 10 days in California. The trip was almost entirely about tasting great wine, but we also spent a few days hiking. We visited wineries in Napa Valley and Sonoma County as well as the Santa Lucia Highlands. In those ten days we drove more than 1,200 miles. The itinerary was full of high quality producers, and helped me check one winery off my bucket list: Diamond Creek. We spent time with old friends and made some new ones.

As you're about to read, the trip was a success. It also solidified my belief that *terroir* is more than nature's influence on wine. You'll read about that if you muscle through this entire report (or skip to it).

Two important notes to make. The first is that there are no scores for wines covered in this report. This is because my focus was on experiencing for myself and capturing for readers the essence of each winery I felt while visiting. This takes more attention and thought

than one might expect (at least for me). I do, however, provide honest opinions, recommendations, and suggested aging data points. Thankfully, there's only one wine covered which I don't recommend spending money on, and uncoincidentally it comes from the fire-plagued 2020 vintage.

The second note is on the buddy comedy/adventure images included in this report. My trip companion and I go back to high school, and lived together in college. We've spent time together in Spain, England, France, Israel, Jordan, the Republic of Georgia, as well as all over the USA, including driving across it twice. We know how to have fun together, and on that note the images are inspired by our relationship.

-Aaron Menenberg, Good Vitis Editor-in-Chief



Hey, you guys ready to let the grapes out?

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Napa

According to the map, we've only gone four inches



Napa Valley became the second American Viticultural Area (AVA) in 1981. At 30 miles long, it's 12 miles more than the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH) AVA, and unlike the SLH, includes both valley floor and mountainsides. Although it can be tempting to think of Napa wines as either valley floor or mountainside styles, it's a bit more diverse than that; there are 17 smaller AVAs nested within it that have been added over the years. Every AVA gets its determination based on the presentation of a unique set of characteristics. This means that in theory each of these 17 AVAs are sufficiently distinct to warrant their own designation.

I've spent a fair amount of time in the Napa Valley and while I understand that there are, indeed, many differentiating characteristics scattered around the Valley, I think it's going too far to say there are 17 distinctively different areas to grow wine grapes from the perspective of the wine they produce. The previous article on the aforementioned SLH discusses a single AVA that is two-thirds as long and runs through a valley along a single hillside with dramatically different temperatures and elevations throughout it. To say the SLH has microclimates is a statement of obvious proportions, but one AVA is enough to cover them all. I am not sure Napa needs 17 because I am not sure it offers 17 areas of

meaningfully different *terroir*.

This is no disrespect to the industry or the wineries I'm about to cover. Ultimately I suspect the fact that there are 17 different AVAs is a reflection of business considerations: Those in the most prime locations want to protect their reputation while those in other locations want a unique brand around which to build their reputation. When the best producers are selling a sense of place, everyone else feels like they need to do the same.

The distinction that matters most to me in Napa is valley floor versus benchland versus mountainside. It's not even that Napa's valley floors, benchlands, or mountainsides are unique among the world's wine growing valley floors, benchlands, and mountainsides, although they have their own set of dynamics. It's that when we refer to "Napa wine," there is a meaningful difference, broadly speaking, in the wines produced from the three different growing environments.

This has much to do with how slope plays into viticulture, although there are differences in soils and climatic aspects as well. Cathy Corison, who makes some of my favorite California cabernet sauvignon off benchland vineyards, has told me

about how critical aspects of grape chemistry like pH are influenced by whether the vine is on a mountainside, bench, or valley floor. Mountain vineyards, she said, in general can produce high, “good” levels of tartaric acid (TA) along with high levels of pH. Conversely, valley floors produce high TA but low pH. These numbers matter because they’re part of a relationship with other chemical factors like malic acid and potassium.

Another reason that pH matters is its inverse relationship with the long-chain anthocyanin tannin that develops in the skins and contributes to the smoothness of a wine’s profile. This isn’t an article about wine chemistry, but it’s an interesting illustration of how topography impacts wine.

To illustrate some of these differences in the Napa Valley, let’s go a few doors up St. Helena Highway from Corison to HALL Wines where they laid out a nice lineup for us of their appellation designate cabernet sauvignons.

The Legend Continues: Diamond Creek



We store our wine in a locker at one of the Uovo (formerly Domaine Storage) locations. One of the upsides to doing so is that they organize a range of events throughout the year, including a quarterly social bring-your-own evening during which people grab a bottle from their locker, pull the cork, and pop them on the table for people to try. I've enjoyed a massive range of wines this way, everything from a 12 year-old Bernard Faurie Hermitage to a younger Roumier Clos de la Bussière to a generous amount of great Champagne from producers like Moussé Fils and Cedric Bouchard.

These events have offered grand cru sangiovese from Il Marroneto and Soldera. We're collectors and lovers of old Mosel riesling, and the 1985 Prüm someone shared one evening was really satisfying. I had a mind-bending 25 year-old Thunder Mountain cabernet sauvignon from Santa Cruz that I'll never get out of my head, which is especially memorable because the winery no longer exists and as such I'll always have unquenchable desire for a wine I'll only try once in my life.

One of the more revelatory BYO options was a 2013 Diamond Creek Three Vineyard Blend cabernet sauvignon. Amongst the many offerings that night, the old school label helped the bottle recede into

diamond creek



**Three Vineyard
Blend**

Napa **2013** Valley

Cabernet Sauvignon

grown, produced and bottled on diamond mountain by
DIAMOND CREEK VINEYARDS CALISTOGA, CA

ALCOHOL 14.5 % BY VOLUME

the background of the glitzier and glamorier labels for almost the entire night.

By the time I got to it, I was just looking for something I hadn't tried yet. It was heavy as I picked it up, the bottle having held on to most of its contents. I thought this might be a sign that it wasn't very good, so I poured just enough into the glass for a single sip. That sip led to an immediate full glass pour. And when that glass was gone in short order, my wife had to remind that the wines were for sharing. I limited myself to half the remaining contents.

The next day I looked Diamond Creek up on the Internet, and texted a few friends about it. I came to an interim conclusion that Diamond Creek was a cult wine that serious wine people south of 50 were unlikely to have real familiarity with. I have since come to find out that many know about it, some have tried it, and many less have visited. I have also come to learn that it is beloved and admired, especially by those in the Napa wine industry.

There seems to be two relatively obvious reasons for why Diamond Creek may not hit the radar of my generation (Millennials). The first is cost. Diamond Creek is quite expensive. The vast majority of

Diamond Creek is purchased through its mailing list where the wines are around \$400 per bottle for the current release. And because they're aging wines, there's the additional cost of storage measured in money and patience. Customers themselves literally have to age into the Diamond Creek price point, and for most of us, that takes a while.

The second reason is highly limited supply. Before the winery was acquired in 2020 by the Rouzaud family, owners of Maison Louis Roederer, some of its estate vineyards (which are the entire source for Diamond Creek wines) were producing at historically low levels, which is saying something because yields have always been kept quite low.

Low yields were just one of a myriad of characteristics that defined the path setting of Al and Adele "Boots" Brounstein, who founded Diamond Creek in 1964. Al was a pharmaceutical wholesaler and the two, both winelovers, moved from Los Angeles to Napa after deciding to get out of the (legal) drug trade and into the wine game.

Al had taken a wine seminar in college, which sparked his initial interest in wine and led to an intermittent job with Ridge Vineyards. Credited as being early visionaries of *terroir* in Napa, they set

out looking for a piece of land to plant a vineyard. From the back of a realtor's pick up truck, he spotted what was to become Diamond Creek and famously said, "I love this spot. I'm going to buy it."

Upon closer inspection of the land, Al noticed several distinct types of soil throughout the property, and he planted the vineyards accordingly, bottling each separately from the very first vintage. While this approach is now common practice, it was new then. *Wine Spectator* credits the Brounsteins with setting "an influential example for vineyard-designated wines [that] ultimately led to the birth of the cult Cabernet category in the 1990s." Al's approach to vineyard designates were, *Wine Spectator* said, "recognized as templates of *terroir*."

This reputation had become well established by 1997 when Al and Boots were invited to the thirtieth anniversary celebration of Jean-Claude Rouzaud's helming of Champagne Louis Roederer in Paris. Neither family had met before, but Diamond Creek was one of what Jean-Claude considered to be the thirty best wineries in the world, and he wanted them all to celebrate with him.

I spoke with Nicole Carter, President of US Wineries at Roederer Collection, about the history, and her



Previous page: Jean-Claude Rouzaud opens a bottle of Cristal for Boots Brounstein.

telling of the story is better than mine is going to be. Picture Al and Boots Brounstein, of esteemed and quirky reputation, in a private room at the famous Tour D'Argent restaurant with the Rouzauds and twenty nine other winemakers from First Growth estates, Chateau Y'quem, DRC, and others; Ridge Vineyards was also there. The two families hit it off and remained in touch, growing closer as the years went on.

Al died, as previously mentioned, in 2006. Boots held on for longer, passing away in 2019 at the age of 92. Boots was herself widely admired within the wine industry. When Al died, she took over management of the estate with the help of their son, Phil Ross, who called Boots "the heart of Diamond Creek" in a statement after her passing. To put the influence of Diamond Creek into perspective, Napa's representative in Congress, Mike Thompson, saw fit to eulogize Boots, having been close friends with the Brousteins.

Phil Steinschiber deserves some of the credit for Jean-Claude Rouzaud's love of Diamond Creek wines as well. Phil became Diamond Creek's

winemaker in 1991, and he remained at the post until Roederer's purchase of Diamond Creek.

As time went on, the estate's production started to fall off. The vineyards were nearly half a century old at that point. There had never been expansion, and reinvestment lagged. The timing and nature of Boots' death aligned with the desire of then (and now) head of Roederer, Frédéric Rouzaud, to add a flagship Napa cabernet producer to the Roederer Collection. The families both felt like the moment and fit were right for the sale of Diamond Creek to Roederer. The deal was completed in 2020, thus closing out the Brounstein chapter of Diamond Creek and setting in motion its next chapter under Roeder custodianship.

Enter Nicole Carter. Nicole, as mentioned, oversees Roederer's US portfolio of wineries, which includes Roederer Estate, Scharffenberger Cellars, Domaine Anderson, and Merry Edwards as well as Diamond Creek. Nicole came to the Diamond Creek acquisition eyes wide open. She wanted to protect the estate while also bring it into full force again.

Part of the evolution involved replacing retiring Phil Steinschiber. In his place they hired Graham Wehmeier, who was selected for the same reasons

that drew him to the opportunity: Viticulture and winemaking had always fallen under one person's purview at Diamond Creek, and Roederer wanted to keep it that way. Graham was only interested in opportunities where winemaking and vineyard management "went hand-in-hand."

"Everything has been in-house with Roederer," Graham told me when we visited. "Even though now, with Roederer, Diamond Creek can afford a vineyard manager and a winemaker, the same person oversees the vines and the wines." Graham has always done both. "It's much harder to do things right like water [the vines] when a vineyard manager makes that call and the winemaker has to deal with it." Graham's employment is evidence that Roederer "doubles down on behaving like a grower versus contracting stuff out."

I asked Nicole why Graham was the guy among what I was sure was a list of top talent seeking the job, and her response was "Graham could do both the vineyards and the winemaking really well." Graham's name was suggested by several Nicole consulted, including Roederer Group's head winemaker Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon, Tony Soter of Etude and Soter fame, and winemaker Françoise Peschon of Heimark, Araujo, Accendo, and other fame.

It is critical that Graham do both well. At full capacity, Diamond Creek is a 2,000-2,500 case-per-year estate. Right now, though, it is at around 1,500 and everyone wants to get production back to that larger number. In Graham's way are some diseased vines. Because the vines are quite old and still producing incredibly good grapes, his preference is to treat the disease and heal the vines in the hopes that they can be brought back to full health. In parts of the vineyards he thinks this approach can work. In others they've replanted and are nurturing young vines into early production. It will be a long, thoughtful, and diligent process.

Working with Graham is a small but dedicated and experienced vineyard team led by Diamond Creek's longest tenured employee, Isidro Guzman, who has been working at the estate since 1981. Guzman leads a team including his half brother and two others. Their institutional knowledge is vital to Roederer's plans for Diamond Creek and Graham's ability to lead execution.

The pursuit of full vineyard health has to be driven by the vineyard itself, Graham told us. "You can say X or Y, but the vineyard dictates a lot." Part of the plan has been to switch over to organic farming and introduce cover crops. Climate change, he



Previous page: The view of Red Rocks Terrace Vineyard (in the foreground) and Volcanic Hill Vineyard from the tasting room deck.

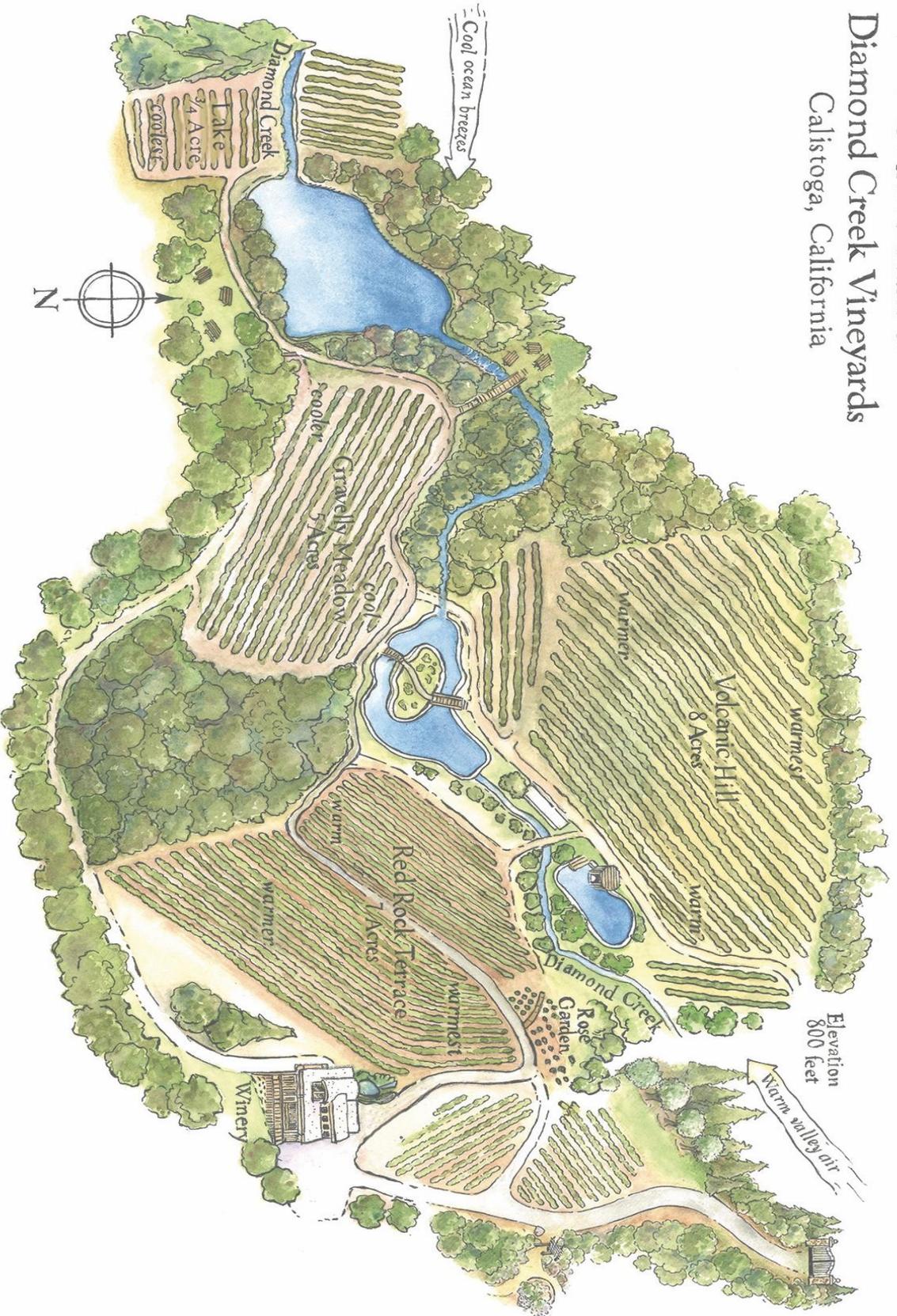
noted, “will have its imprint as well.” It is a work in progress, but one based on a 10-year plan that was created up by the team when Graham joined. As Graham drove us around the vineyards and we walked certain portions, the importance to him of respecting the property and its history is evident, and a recognition that the right touch is a relatively light one when it comes to vines with a history of producing such high standards of wine.

Of the 80 acres within the estate’s boundaries, there are 21 acres of vines. Most are producing grapes going into finished wine but a meaningful amount are not yet yielding either enough grapes and/or grapes of sufficient quality to make production. The goal is that in time, they all will.

Diamond Creek’s vineyards are truly microsites, something you can learn from reading about the winery but really only understand by visiting. It’s a very small property as far as Napa wineries go.

Three of the four vineyards come within 60 feet of each other at one point, but the wines they produce

The Microclimates of Diamond Creek Vineyards Calistoga, California



Previous page: Map provided by Diamond Creek

are distinctively different. The concept of *terroir* can be a bit controversial, and, I think, overblown at times. But if you want to experience *terroir* in an indisputable way, visit Diamond Creek. It is hard, after touring the property, to taste the wines in the tasting room with a view of those vineyards and believe they come from the same single view because there are many differences.

The smallest and somewhat removed Lake Vineyard, only three-quarters of an acre, is the flattest and coolest of the four vineyards and situated adjacent to a small lake. Its rocky soil is dry farmed. As a finicky site, it is the least common of the four vineyard designates in terms of annual production and is only produced as a stand-alone in the best years. Unfortunately Diamond Creek didn't produce one in 2019, so we weren't able to taste it as part of our 2019 vintage flight, which was the current release when we were there.

The 8-acre southern-oriented Volcanic Hill Vineyard coats an undulating hillside facing the winery. Its soils are a light, fluffy grey ash that settled in the area quite a long time ago after a volcanic eruption. This is the warmest of the four vineyards.

Red Rock Terrace Vineyard is the first you see as you drive in, and is the most immediately available looking out to the vineyards from the winery. These 7 acres are planted on a rocky soil died, you guessed it, red by its high iron content. Opposite the valley from Volcanic Hill, it is northern facing and receives considerably less direct sunlight.

Rounding the portfolio out is Gravelly Meadow Vineyard. This 5-acre plot is planted in a brown pebbly soil. Flat relative to Volcanic Hill and Red Rock Terrace, it sits in a tiny microclimate that is just a tad bit warmer than that of Lake Vineyard, making it the second coolest.

The vineyards sit at various elevations, from 530 feet above sea level to 610 feet. While this difference might not seem like a meaningful amount, it matters because of how the property is laid out. Tom Brady could stand on the winery deck overlooking the top of Red Rock Terrace and throw a football well into Volcanic Hill. Lake Vineyard is completely out of sight from Brady at this point, but as the crow flies it's probably a fifth of a mile at most.

These differences determine a sequential ripening pattern that Graham walked us through. First, ripening kicks off at the top Volcanic Hill, and starts

to work its way down the hill towards the lowest vines. Second, as ripening reaches the middle third of Volcanic Hill, Red Rock Terrace kicks off. Third, as it hits the top of the final (lower) third of Volcanic Hill, Gravelly Meadow and Lake start their respective ripening. Harvest, in a “typical year,” Graham told us, goes into November.

At this point I hope I’m starting to paint a clear(ish) picture of why these little 21 acres have four distinctive vineyards with their own unique microclimates and characteristics.

To highlight these differences, the wines are all made in the same way in that they all go through the same process using the same inputs, e.g. they all get oak and none get concrete. But Graham is still getting to know each vineyard’s eccentricities, as well as the particularities of sections of each vineyard, and he’s learning that while “what you taste [in the wines] isn’t something I put in, like oak, if I can accentuate the vineyard by doing for example, Volcanic Hill in barrel for an extra few months, I should consider that.” To the extent he does anything differently, it is quite minor. He’s also learning to be “less afraid to let the green notes in because of how well they age.”

Production, as I mentioned earlier, is miniscule even when every vine is yielding production-worthy grapes. There is usually a bit more Volcanic Hill, but not always. “Efficiency and economies of scale don’t work in our favor,” Graham said, which is purposeful in the design of the vineyards. It really is about producing the best wine possible regardless of how much of it there is, and exploring the wine reality of each vineyard and its microclimate.

We tasted the three 2019s in the order of Gravelly Meadow, Red Rock Terrace, and Volcanic Hill. Graham had already poured them when we arrived and placed them in this order, but he was debating the order with himself throughout the tasting. As I traded back and forth through the line up over the next hour, my opinion changed a few times as well. What didn’t change, though, was my love of all three.

The 2019 Red Rock Terrace was my favorite. The tannin is remarkably fine, and I do not say “remarkable” lightly. These tannins are matched by a bright, juicy acid that accentuates red fruit (raspberry and plum dominate), florals, and a graphite-mint-pepper minerality that is easy to get lost in. It has a drying, fine finish.

The 2019 Volcanic Hill has what Graham calls “classic 29

Napa appeal” that he “[understands] the most right away” compared to the other vineyard designates. The roots aren’t as deep in Volcanic Hill as the other vineyards, and unlike the others can be irrigated. I found it super juicy and grippy with a fine black tea and dark plum tannin. It had the darkest nose and reminded me of a briar patch of aromas and flavors. It is the most power of the three.

Finally, we tasted the 2019 Gravelly Meadow, which struck a balance for me between the other two. The tannins are more relaxed than Red Rock Terrace but not as big as Volcanic Hill. The nose is darker than Red Rock Terrace, but not as dark as Volcanic Hill. It had the sweetest nose, the most saturated flavors, the widest range of fruit notes, and the most significant florals.

All three were exceptional, but not at the heights they will achieve with significant aging. We discussed aging with Graham, who told us that Red Rock Terrace generally ages the longest, that Volcanic Hill sometimes doesn’t age as long as some project, and that Gravelly Meadow’s structure eases more quickly in the glass than the other two. Regardless, I think I’d give each of these until 2029 before checking in.

Our time at Diamond Creek was superb. We really enjoyed touring the vineyards, hearing stories about the Brounsteins and the property, getting to know Graham, learning about Roederer's approach, and tasting the wines. There are a lot of wineries worth visiting in Napa, but this is one that should be on everyone's "must visit" list if for no other reason than the wines are a proof-of-concept of *terroir* and the property is right there for you to fully appreciate why. There is every reason to think the Diamond Creek legend will not only live on under Roederer ownership, but flourish.



Terroir

Note: Everyone I mention in this section is in my life because of our mutual love for wine and all that it encapsulates. As I wrote in the 2024 Riesling Special Edition:

I admire wine's ability to bring people together. Not through inebriation, but rather by the way it stops you mid-thought, refocuses your mind on the present moment, and inspires you to look across the table and connect with the other person over the shared experience. Once that happens, your time together is likely to be more meaningful and memorable. A bond is formed.



No sympathy for the devil; keep that in mind. Buy the wine, take the ride...and if the tannin occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well...maybe chalk it up to forced consciousness expansion: Tune in, freak out, get beaten.



Previous page: Myself with Stu Smith (Smith-Madrone) and my friend, Jesse. I'm holding a birth year 1983 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon.

I believe in the concept of *terroir*, which is a French term for how the particular climate, soil, and terrain of a region affect the structure, aroma, and flavor of wine. I say “believe” but science has thus far been unable to prove its reality. Yet, the wine profession by-and-large has fully bought in. *Terroir*-specific winemaking, which is something touted by every winery in this *California Grapes Special Edition* and well beyond, pursues a process that attempts to avoid altering and/or accentuate the *terroir's* particular characteristics in each wine.

Terroir is the main driver behind the practice of legally defining specific areas of wine grape growing. In the US we call these regions American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs, and they require an application to and approval by the federal government. In my experience, most of the time these regions are sufficiently different from others in terms of *terroir* characteristics that their unique distinction makes sense.

As winemaking has proliferated around the world, I'd argue that the average quality of wine is better

than it's ever been in my drinking lifetime, even if there has also been a homogenization of some styles (which many would attribute to Robert Parker and the wider wine media). This burden of plenty creates a challenge for which us wine lovers are very fortunate: How do we choose among the numerous high quality wines to purchase?

Increasingly, the customer's guide to answering that question is 'what's their story?', meaning, 'I'd like to understand not just the *terroir*, but also the particulars of winemaker's role in harnessing it.' Often, a winery's ethos is also considered. Providing information to answer these questions is the main purpose of *Good Vitis*.

Over the years I've come to realize that there is more to wine than vineyards and crush pads and tanks and cellars. It may seem obvious, but those sacred places and things, left to themselves, don't complete the personality on a wine - it is how people animate them that ultimately determines how people experience the wine.

Good wine can come from great grapes and average winemakers. Great wine only comes from great winemakers, even if they only have good grapes. We can't help but manipulate *terroir* at least



a little simply by doing the bare minimum in the winemaking process. And, we should hope for masterful manipulation, regardless of what entails, because that is how we end up with the best wine.

So, the recipe for great wine is great *terroir* and great human intervention and manipulation (to whatever extent the situation determines). Yet when most in the industry talk of *terroir*-driven wine as the gold standard, they are often purposefully implying that human intervention and manipulation reduces the ultimate impressiveness of the wine. The issue with this presentation is that while *terroir* is presented as the determining factor of a wine, equally if not more determinant is the ethos of the people who manage those natural influences. A more complete vision of *terroir*, then, has to include the human element.

The greatest pleasure and privilege of writing *Good Vitis* is I have an excuse to spend time with the people who grow grapes and make and promote wine. They educate me, they inspire me, and some of them have stuck in my life and become good friends. It is these experiences that have led me to the conclusion that *terroir* is human.

When I think back on our visit to Smith-Madrone on 39

this trip, I don't think first about the incredible 1988 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon that we had the privilege of consuming. My first memory is descending into the winery's cellar with Stu Smith on a mission to find a few good old bottles to pull. Our mutual excitement combined with the room that opened up at the bottom of the stairs to reveal the autobiography of the Smith brothers' lives' work was a heart-touching and heartwarming moment.

I've known Stu for eight years, spending time with him in Washington, DC, where I used to live, and in Napa both at his winery and his home. We've shared many a bottle together over a big range of conversation. We've spent a few hours driving around his property several times on his ATV, and shared meals at several locations around the estate. I think we've probably spent several factors more time talking about forest management than vineyard management, and we've dedicated far more time talking about local and national politics and the wine industry than Stu's winemaking approach.

I like Stu more than I like his wines, and I like his wines a lot. I like his wine most when I drink it with him. But regardless of whether I'm pulling the cork with or without him, I'm experiencing an intimate



Vintage 2022

ROMBAUER
VINEYARDS

Santa Lucia Highlands
PINOT NOIR
Family Owned & Operated
Est. 1980

Previous page: Sneak peaking the 2022 Rombauer Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir with Rombauer consulting winemaker Adam Lee and David Zinni, National Sales Manager for Miramar Estate.

expression of who he and his brother are as people. While I'd be curious what another Napa cab winemaker would do with a Smith-Madrone's Cook's Flat Vineyard harvest, even if they meticulously followed the Smith brothers' recipe, the experience of drinking that wine would be different for me. The Brothers Smith planted that vineyard decades ago; they are its parent and as such it and its bounty behave certain ways unique to their rearing.

If you find this vision of *terroir* overly romantic or, perhaps like the science surrounding the concept of *terroir*, unbelievable because it's unproven, let me point you to the example of making a beloved grandmother's recipe. It's not exactly a one-to-one comparison because, unlike the Cook's Flat Vineyard one, ingredients can vary. However, like any good relative of a grandparent, you know that even with the best of ingredients you'll always be lacking that one irreplaceable one: Grandma's love.

This doesn't mean the new wine would not or could not be as good. Rather, it means that it will be

THE COUNCIL
SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

Pinot Noir

VINTAGE 2019

Rosella's Vineyard 34%
Garys' Vineyard 34%
Pisoni Vineyard 32%

THE COUNCIL

The Council was created in July of 2005 in the caves at Pisoni vineyard. The resulting wine within this bottle represents the collective efforts of James Varner, Jerry Yang, Kyle Ditzler, Paul Brown, Bob Varner, Kevin Sawyer, Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni. The Pisoni clone Pinot Noir from separate lots of Rosella's, Garys' and Pisoni Vineyards were blended in proportions determined by The Council to allow each vineyard to express its distinct personality.



124 cases produced

ALCOHOL 14.2% BY VOLUME

Previous two pages: A bottle of The Council we enjoyed on the trip.

different. And that's exactly my point: The human element is every bit a part of a wine's DNA as the natural ones. *Terroir* is inherently and vibrantly human, and the exclusion of the human element obscures the existence and importance of a hugely determinant factor of wine.

A fantastic case study for this is the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH), which has been profiled in this *Good Vitis* issue. As I discussed there, the SLH has a handful of what many would describe as the AVA's grand cru vineyards. Most of them exist in this world because of one, or both, of two families: the Pisonis and the Francionis.

For or a variety of reasons, a relative many wineries get to make wines from this small set of vineyards. Pick any vintage and line up several wineries' Gary's Vineyard or Rosella's Vineyard pinot noirs and you'll get an equal number of divergent wines. In this scenario, because these are growers who prize both quality and customer service, many grape buyers get to set their pick dates, and that means there will be differences in chemistry between the sets of raw materials. This is just one of numerous human

elements involved in the winemaking process.

The person who introduced me to the SLH was Adam Lee, co-founder of Siduri Winery who, after selling it to Jackson Family Wines, started a winery called Clarice Wine Company that makes three different SLH pinot noirs each vintage. He's extremely close with the family of SLH producers and growers, and intimately involved in the trade association group that represents the AVA. He also consults for a number of wineries, some of whom purchase SLH fruit.

The Clarice pinot noirs are extremely good wines. Each year's release includes single vineyard designates from Gary's and Rosella's Vineyards and an SLH AVA blend. In each of the vintages I've tried, I've preferred the Gary's to the Rosella's four out of five times. The one year when that wasn't true was the same year that I found the same preference between those two vineyard designate expressions made by the Franscioni's ROAR winery. Yet the Clarice and ROAR wines from the same vintages and vineyards are very different wines. I'd wager that many sommeliers presented with the 2021 Clarice and ROAR Gary's and Rosella's pinots would have a hard time pairing them appropriately based on vineyard, let alone call their vineyard or even AVA



024

MORET

PN 114

Previous page: One of Morét Brealynn's rows of pinot noir at Lakeview Vineyard.

among a wider selection of even just California pinots from the same vintage.

You could argue that I'm right for different reasons. I could see many argue that this result would occur because the SLH is not a widely studied AVA among sommeliers, and that would be true if I had not limited my hypothetical to a comparison of two vineyards produced by two wineries. Reading this, Gary Francioni and Adam Lee might point out that their respective blocks produce different chemistry and that their irrigation regimes were different and that their pick dates were different (I know all of these things to be true). But, I'd wager that they'd agree that these differences only exist because of the human element.

To appropriate a James Blunt quote from his *Top Gear* appearance, winemakers "are like arseholes, everyone has one." There's a small vineyard in Sonoma County called Lakeview. A number of wineries source from it, but only Morét Brealynn is using it to make a vineyard designate wine. The inaugural release in 2021 came ripping out of the gates, but in 2022 Morét produced something truly

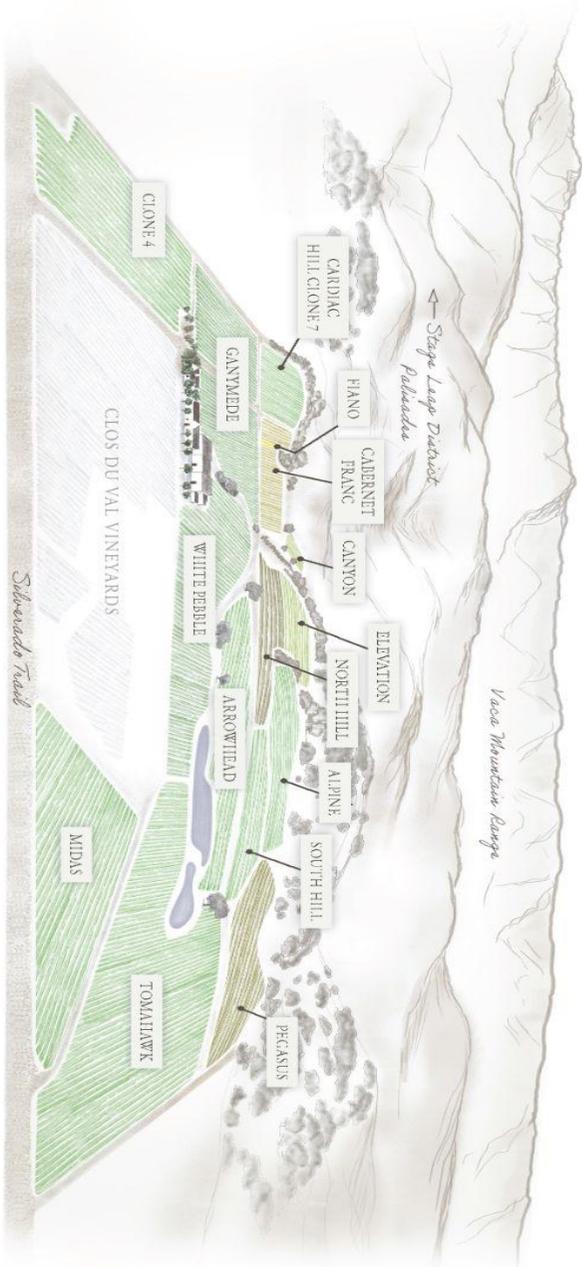
special, one of the best American pinots I've ever had.

Unlike the Gary's and Rosella's, it has no comparison because, as I said, Morét is the only one doing a vineyard designate. And that, in its own way, is a statement about human *terroir*. While rows and blocks within a vineyard can differ, with a vineyard as small as Lakeview, it still takes the attention and dedication of the people working it to turn it into a wine worthy of its own bottling. If I'm Jeff Mangahas at Williams-Selyem, and I'm looking for a new vineyard, and I'm tasting Morét's Lakeview, I'm inquiring about getting my own rows.

Another winemaker whose talents I've come to greatly respect is Elizabeth Vianna, head winemaker at Chimney Rock Winery since 2005. Located in the Stag's Leap AVA and farming 28 blocks on 119 acres of estate vineyards, Chimney Rock is one of Napa's cabernet producers that best demonstrate the veracity of my concept of *terroir*; there are many Stag's Leaps cabs out there, but Chimney Rock distinguishes itself in a blind line up of its peers. This is because different growing circumstances do not equal different wines without a highly skilled human touch, and that is exactly what winemaker Elizabeth and her team bring to the winery.

Chimney Rock

STAGS LEAP DISTRICT
NAPA VALLEY



CABERNET SAUVIGNON
VINEYARDS: Clone 4, Midas, Ganymede, White Pebble, Tomahawk, South Hill Alpine, Cardiac Hill Clone 7



MERLOT
VINEYARDS: North Hill, Pegasus



PETIT VERDOT
VINEYARDS: Elevation, Canyon



FIANO
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc (A Single Row)



CABERNET FRANC
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc

Over the last year I've had the pleasure of tasting wines from across Chimney Rock's vineyards, some of them with Elizabeth. Each one embraces the natural power and acidity of Stags Leap while achieving refinement and elegance rarely seen in American wine. Most Napa winemakers would be lucky to occasionally achieve the Chimney Rock profile that Elizabeth and her team have made routine more than a few times in their careers, although the current release 2021 vintage seems to be extra special.

Watching contestants of Netflix show Barbeque Showdown react when they arrive at the "barbeque compound" in episode 1 of each season reminds me of how Elizabeth talks about Chimney Rock's vineyards: There are so many great things to play with in the pursuit of making the best product possible. The vineyard map on the previous page, courtesy of Chimney Rock, will give you a visual of one version of a winemaker's paradise playground.

Elizabeth geeks out in the pursuit of figuring out how to maximize the potential of each vineyard, of each block, each varietal, and each clone, every vintage. Equally, she geeks out talking about and tasting the differences and finding out which single vineyard wines people prefer.



In the fall of 2023, Chimney Rock sent me a preview of some of its 2021 releases pulled from the southern end of the property. On this trip, Elizabeth and Megghan Driscoll, VP of Communications at parent company Terlato Wines, brought a selection of 2021s from the northern part of the property to dinner.

Even though it wasn't present at dinner, I had to tell Elizabeth that one of my absolute favorite white wines in the world is Chimney Rock's Elevage Blanc, which is a blend of sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris. I've had them with as much as twelve years of age, and am convinced the wine is both one of America's most under-the-radar white wines as well as one of its very best. As part of the 2021 vintage release, it continues that streak.

Elizabeth was keen to find out how I thought the northern end Ganymede Vineyard cabernet sauvignon compared to the southern end Tomahawk cabernet sauvignon. Representing two of the winery's flagship single vineyard cabernets, Elizabeth said that most people have a preference they hang on to. While both are outstanding, determine a preference was easy for me: It's the Tomahawk, I told her. The first sip of the 2021 brought deafening silence to my world, and I don't remember the last time I was so sad to finish a

bottle.

I have also never had an American Bordeaux-style blend that reminded me so much of old school Bordeaux as the 2021 Elevage rouge, which in this vintage is comprised of 55% merlot, 29% cabernet sauvignon, 14% petit verdot, and 3% malbec. It's a particular blend that, when made as it has been, can only be downgraded from a perfect critique because of its youth. I'd rather judge a wine at its peak, and like the Tomahawk I imagine both could have a run-in with perfection.

What I love so much about the Elevage Blanc, Rouge, and Tomahawk is that they give you the best of Stags Leap while reminding you so clearly of the old world style of Bordeaux that no longer exists, really, even in Bordeaux. They are a fusion of Stags Leap and early 1980s Bordeaux in the best way possible, and that makes them stand out so clearly from other Stags Leaps wines.

Certainly a bit of nature plays a role, but Elizabeth's nearly 20 years of experience with this plot of land has helped her refine and hone in on how to get the most from the vines. I've had numerous winemakers tell me how long they think it takes to really learn a vineyard, and it's always a double-digit number. This

makes it all the more important to recognize the irreplaceable and very perceptible role that humans play in *terroir*-driven wine. Chimney Rock is proof.

As I said at the head of this article, I admire wine's ability to bring people together. What I did not say then is that a major reason that I believe wine does this is because it is made by humans as an interpretation of something we can all see, smell, touch, and taste. It's not all that different to me than painting: Grapes, instead of paint, is the raw material and a winery, instead of a canvas, is the place where it is created. Some artists prize certain paints because of their ingredients, as do winemakers with vineyard sourcing.

Art is in the eye of the beholder just as wine is in the palate of the drinker. Yet, we don't place the origin of the paint at the center of the discussion like we do *terroir*. And in doing that, we miss an incredibly important part of wine appreciation.



It was an awakening. That 83' Smith-Madrone reminded me that I was alive, that I was a man full of energy, love, and passion. It was like being young again.



