

CULT CALIFORNIA

ROBERSON WINE

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Diamond Creek

Calistoga

A cult wine for the purist, Diamond Creek has never been about big Parker scores (they never really got any). Back in the late '60s a Canadian pharmaceutical millionaire based in California called Al Brounstein decided to build a winery from scratch on Diamond Mountain. By 1968 he had cleared much of the scrubland on the property and set about planting vineyards of Cabernet Sauvignon. It is worth remembering that all of this happened pre-Judgement of Paris, so land was cheap and Brounstein managed to get an amazingly diverse site with a number of distinctive terroirs. After Al passed away in 2006 the estate has been run by his brilliantly named wife - Boots Brounstein.

There are four vineyard sites at Diamond Creek. South facing Volcanic Hill is the largest at just over 3 ha and produces the most long lived of Diamond Creek's wines. 3ha Red Rock Terrace is also a warm site, despite being a north-facing vineyard. It is named after its red soils, the colour a product of its high iron content. The third vineyard, Gravelly Meadow, is a cooler site with the stones and pebbles that show this used to be a river bed and this site gives the most elegant, finely structured wines. Lake Vineyard, the fourth and smallest plot, is a cool lakeside vineyard of about 0.3 ha. Only eight vintages have seen a Lake Vineyard wine produced, as the plot struggles to achieve full ripeness. This makes it the true cult wine of Diamond Creek (10 bottles sold for \$300,000 in 2002), but all of the wines are much loved by fans of Californian Cabernet.

l'Aventure

Paso Robles

Stephan Asso is a French winemaker that spent years making wine in Bordeaux before, according to the man himself, he got frustrated with appellation laws and decided to up sticks and head to California. He travelled the world looking for terroir that would capture his imagination and after crossing South Africa, Argentina and Lebanon off the list, he discovered the Napa Valley and decided that it was the ideal place to begin his adventure. Well, his l'Aventure to be precise. Much of the buzz around l'Aventure is thanks to the Estate wine (a Bordeaux blend) and his Côte a Côte cuvée, a blend of Mourvedre, Grenache and Syrah. These are the wines that have garnered much praise in the press and Parker has been liberal with the 97 and 98 point scores.

Côte a Côte is aged in 50% new French oak and receives the usual treatment - hand harvesting, prolonged cold soak before a cool fermentation. Elevage in barrique until bottling unfiltered and unfiltered. To be honest, it is difficult to see what he does differently to his time in Bordeaux and the 'constraints' that he seemed so desperate to get away from. Regardless, Parker seems convinced and the fact that only about 150-200 cases are produced means that it has easily attained cult status.

"This is brilliant wine from a Frenchman who has captured the magic of Paso Robles."

Robert Parker

Harlan Estate

St Helena / Oakville

Bill Harlan is a bone fide Napa legend. As is often the case, he wasn't born into wine, but following a mega-successful career in property development he decided that he wanted to establish the equivalent of a Bordeaux first growth in the Napa Valley. Harlan idolised Bob Mondavi (they had worked together to establish the Napa wine auction at one of Harlan's luxury resorts) and set his heart on creating a wine estate in Oakville, home to the Mondavi winery and their renowned To Kalon vineyard. In 1984 Harlan found himself an initial 23 acre site and set about planting the vineyards with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. He didn't release any wine until the 1990 vintage (which came out in '96), when 350 cases made their way onto the market and started the ascent of Harlan to cult status.

Today the vineyard area stretches to 40 acres (17ha), with some plots reaching altitudes of over 1200ft. The main parcel, from which Harlan Estate comes, is a terraced plot of vines at 350ft that sits atop volcanic bedrock. The wine is fermented in open top wooden tanks before being moved to 100% new French oak barrels for the malo-lactic fermentation and subsequent maturation (24-36 months depending on the vintage). Approximately 1800 cases are made in each vintage and it appears that Harlan has achieved his goal of establishing a 'first growth' in Napa - in terms of prices and prestige at least.

"Harlan continue to produce what may be the single most profound wine in California."

Robert Parker

Bond

St Helena

In addition to their estate wines, the team at Harlan (which includes Michel Rolland as consultant) are responsible for a variety of other cuvées. One specific project is Bond, which is, according to the official propaganda, a selection of the 5 best vineyards they have worked with over the past 25 years when buying fruit for their non-estate wines. They have 20 year leases on five sites (Pluribus, Quella, Melbury, St Eden and Vecina), three planted to 100% Cab Sauv, with St Eden having 5% Cab Franc and Pluribus having 13% Merlot and 11% Cab Franc. Production is tiny, with 600-700 cases of each wine available to a heavily oversubscribed waiting list.

Pluribus, which we will taste tonight, sits high on Spring Mountain at an elevation of over 1100ft. The wine is aged for 22months in 100% new French oak and bottled without fining or filtration.

"All of these offerings represent world-class Cabernet Sauvignons from Napa, meant to endure 30 or more years of cellaring."

Robert Parker

Sine Qua Non

Ventura

If there was a world championship for wine labels, then Manfred Krankl's Sine Qua Non would definitely be in the running for a medal. Cynics might argue that the elaborate presentation of SQN wines is what has propelled them to cult status, but they would most probably be drowned out by the hordes of screaming customers trying desperately to get a bottle or two. The fact is that SQN should be used as a case study for how to market a high-end wine brand, but the wines also offer genuine substance and quality.

The SQN project was begun by Manfred Krankl as a hobby while he was running a restaurant in LA. He purchased some grapes in 1994 to make a wine that they could serve in the restaurant and the 100 or so cases got a fantastic response. A bottle found its way to Robert Parker, who scored it 95 points and, in true cult Californian fashion, a star was born. Krankl expanded production steadily over the next few years and then turned his attention to building a 'domaine' rather than continuing to buy fruit from growers. Today, Manfred has moved out of his downtown Ventura winery/warehouse/junkyard to a more salubrious estate near Lake Casitas and he has pieced together 30 acres of vineyards in order to have better control over the viticultural side of the business. Total production is around 3000 cases and the same wine is never made twice - making SQN wines among the most collectable in the world. That and the massive Parker scores.....

"compelling, singular, and world-class wines that are like no others being produced on Planet Earth"

Robert Parker

Joseph Phelps

St Helena

Joe Phelps made his money in construction, but in the early 1970s he decided to invest in the world of wine and began putting together an estate that today comprises over 350 acres in Rutherford, Stags Leap, Oakville, Yountville and South Napa. When Phelps released a 1974 Bordeaux blend called 'Insignia' made from his best vineyard parcels, it became one of the first cult wines in California and is still widely regarded as one of the region's finest wines. As demand for Insignia increased, so did production volumes and today there are about 13,000 cases made every year. Therefore despite Insignia's big reputation, the real cult wine in the portfolio is the 'Backus' which was introduced with the 1977 vintage. The Backus vineyard is biodynamically farmed and is a prime location in Oakville, 1500 cases are made each year and the wine is fermented in stainless steel before being aged for 24 months in new French oak and bottled unfiltered.

"The Insignia cuvee has been one of Napa's great Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines since its inception in 1974"

Robert Parker

Rudd Estate

Oakville

What is now Rudd Estate used to be known as Girard until Leslie Rudd bought it in 1996. Sparing no expense, he hired an all-star cast to make his wines, including David Abreu as vineyard manager, David Ramey (now Pat Sullivan) as the winemaker, and.....you guessed it, Michel Rolland as the consultant. With this team in place, big Parker scores were not far behind and when 95points duly arrived for one of their 1998 wines it was clear that Rudd was on the road to cult status. Parker was insistent that things were going to keep getting better at Rudd, as much of their vineyard land was of top quality. Neighbouring vineyards include Phelps' Backus, Dalla Valle, Screaming Eagle, Plumpjack and Mondavi's Opus One, so there is plenty of pedigree in the locality. The best parcels of the estate are used to make their Oakville Proprietary Red which has racked up 99points recently. The wine is a 1300 case blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec, with the final quantities of each variety changing from year to year. An interesting thing to note with this wine is that it is fermented using native yeasts - a rare occurrence in the land of synthetic everything. Following steel tank fermentation the juice is moved to new French oak barrels for 20months of maturation.

"This awesome red is a future legend in the making."

Robert Parker

Dunn Vineyards

Howell Mountain

Randy Dunn began his winemaking career at Caymus, but he left in 1979 to set up Dunn Vineyards high above the fog-line on Howell Mountain. Since the rapturous reception received for his first vintage, Dunn has maintained cult status by keeping production small and quality at the very top of Napa's Cabernet tree. There are two wines in the portfolio (2000 cases of each are produced), a Napa Cab (including some bought in fruit from the valley floor) and the Howell Mountain Cabernet made from estate fruit up on the mountain. The wines are aged for up to 30 months in 75% new French oak. His position high up on the mountain gives the wines incredible structure and clarity of fruit and much of their reputation is built on their fantastic capacity to age.

An interesting thing about Randy Dunn is that he doesn't like wines with high alcohol, so if a vintage gives him more than 14% he will use reverse osmosis to reduce the ABV.

"in top vintages the Howell Mountain is one of the great wines, not just of California, but of the world."

Antonio Galloni

Kongsgaard

Napa

'Natural wine' is practically non-existent in California, where manipulation of some sort is the order of the day in every winery. John Kongsgaard is different though and since his first release in 1996 he has excelled in making limited volume wines without recourse to the hands-on approach taken by many of his peers. John made his reputation at Newton Vineyards where he established a stellar reputation for his Chardonnay and it is this varietal that has formed the basis of his reputation for his own wines, thanks in large part to the exceptional quality of the fruit grown in his Judge vineyard. As well as the 10 acre plot of family vines (owned since 1920), John farms other parcels on long term leases and buys fruit from renowned local growers. The St Helena vineyard that he gets the fruit for his 350 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon is owned by star viticulturist David Abreu.

The wines are fermented with indigenous yeasts, no additives or enzymes and undergo a long élevage in new oak barrels without any addition of sulphur until the bottling, which is done without fining or filtration.

“John Kongsgaard is in search of the Holy Grail and these are among the most interesting, naturally made wines one will find on Planet Earth.”

Robert Parker

Arietta

Oakville

Not content with bottling wines under his own label, John Kongsgaard set up Arietta in 1996 with Fritz Hatton, and apparently *“the partnership was born of a shared passion for fine wine and classical music.”* It appears that the real reason was a shared enthusiasm for a 2.3-acre plot of vines called 'H Block', which is the highest vineyard on the renowned Hudson Ranch and widely regarded as some of the best Cabernet Franc in California. From 2000, when the H Block was bottled and labelled as such, Parker started doling out decent scores, peaking with 98 points for the 2002 vintage, which we will taste tonight. By 2005 Kongsgaard's work seems to have been done, as the Hattons bought him out and installed Andy Erickson as the winemaker.

The 'H Block' is typically blended with a bit of Merlot from an adjacent parcel and 350-500 cases are produced. The wine is fermented with indigenous yeast, macerated on the skins for 6 weeks, and then aged for 2 years in 100% new French oak barrels before bottling without fining or filtration.

“These striking offerings have a European sensitivity for elegance, structure, and delineation, but are clearly products of California.”

Robert Parker