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Vintage Matters in Napa Valley - or Does it?

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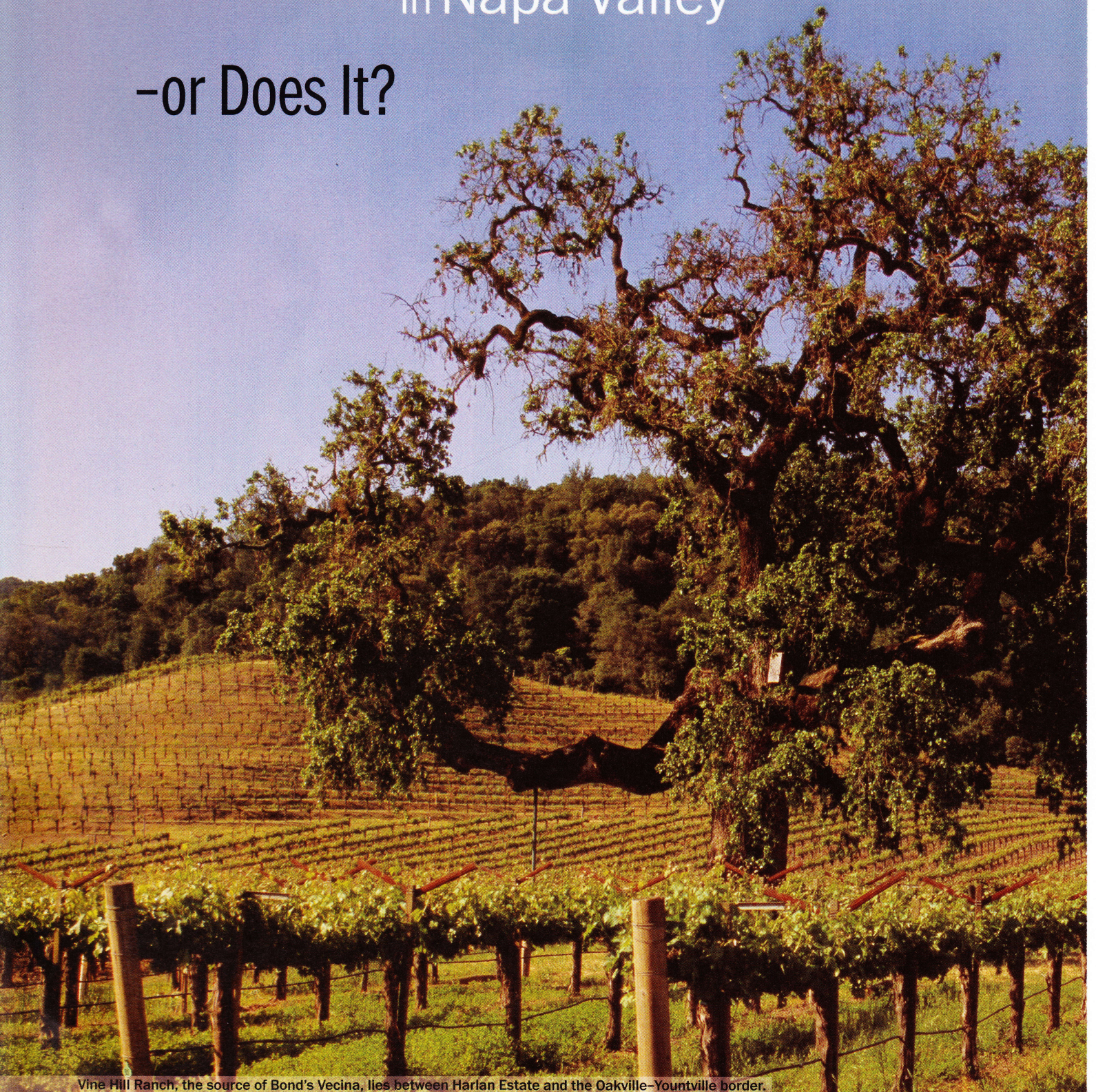
December 2010
wineandspiritsmagazine.com
US \$4.99 • CANADA \$5.99



Vintage Matters

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-or Does It?



Vine Hill Ranch, the source of Bond's Vecina, lies between Harlan Estate and the Oakville-Yountville border.



a perspective on Napa Valley Cabernet

by Joshua Greene

The Napa Valley rises out of the San Pablo Bay heading north, then bends to the northwest at Oakville. You wouldn't necessarily notice it when driving Highway 29, but it's clear on a topographical map. A small shift in direction, it creates a climate boundary under certain conditions, one detail in an infinite number of minor details that factor into Napa Valley vintages.

The bend is easy to see from Bond's vineyard at the Oakville–Yountville line. The vineyard is a buttress against the western valley wall, a site whose steep sandstone terraces produce Vecina, which may be Bond's most compelling cabernet of 2007. From the top row of vines, the view south sweeps across the benchlands of Dominus and the town of Yountville across the highway, where *The French Laundry* developed the sort of meticulous perfectionism in food that Bill Harlan has made fashionable in wine—first at Harlan Estate, now at Bond. Across the valley, the bend at Stags Leap redirects traffic, the cars and cyclists continuing unabated, the air and fog eddying the way water will circle back when it hits a bend in the river.

With the Napa River flowing down valley from Calistoga, it may seem counter-intuitive that the airflow should be up. But as heat rises off Calistoga, it draws cooler air in from the Bay, along with fog. Paul Roberts, who manages Bond for Harlan, led me up to the top of Vecina to see that eddy in the fog, a localized effect that's key to understanding the terroir of the site. It is one of six sites the Bond team has selected for a series of single-vineyard Napa Valley cabernets, each playing out with its own take on the weather. It was the Bond wines that got me thinking about contemporary vintages in Napa Valley. On release, the 2006 wines showed more vineyard variation, the expression of each site more distinct. The 2007s were richer and more apparently oaked, carrying what Roberts called “a lot of baby fat.” I revisited

them on several occasions over the course of two months, hoping to perceive them more clearly—and slowly the sites began to reveal their differences. At this level of winemaking, of sensitive farming and careful selection, the wine has been so coddled along its path to bottle that vintage is often a moot point.

Harlan is selling perfectionism, and the relatively benign climate of Napa Valley allows him to create a business around that plan. He can show minor variations in character from one site to another without significant variations in quality.

Once you drive down onto the valley floor, however, the long march of cabernet vines from Coombsville to Calistoga and up into the hills includes a lot of less gifted sites. What isn't selected for wineries like Bond makes its way down the pecking order, eventually finding its way into the bulk wine market. In 2010, a notably cool season punctuated by two severe heat spikes, the lesser wines may well suffer: Several winemakers noted that there may be a lot of green, herbaceous cabernet going into bulk wine. At the high end, the vintage may provide an opportunity for some great wines—as did 1998, which was roundly trounced at the time in favor of the abundant and generous 1997. Today, most 1997s are tired or dead, while the good 1998s are alive and beautiful.

“It's not about ripening in Napa Valley,” said Agustin Huneeus, proprietor of Quintessa in Rutherford, as we tasted through three recent vintages. “The problem could be

if you overcrop. Or if you get scared and pick before ripening. The vintage differences are more accentuated in the lesser production.” At the high end, “the vintage differences are less than in Bordeaux.” In fact, Quintessa’s 2006 is a luscious, rich cabernet with a vibrant edge—and none of the austerity that some associate with the vintage.

John Williams at Frog’s Leap is another denizen of Rutherford, just north of the fog eddy, where his mentor, André Tchelistcheff, made the benchmark cabernets famous. “André used to describe Rutherford tannins as rubbing your hand across velvet backwards,” Williams said when we were tasting his 2007 Rutherford Cabernet.

It’s interesting to talk vintage character with Williams because he dry farms. Irrigation, on the surface, would seem to be one factor that diminishes vintage variation. But in fact, things are rarely as simple as they seem. Williams is emphatic that dry farming is different from not irrigating: Specifically, it’s a set of viticultural practices that creates a viable environment for the vine without the addition of water.

Leaving aside the issues of soil compaction and shallow roots that often go hand-in-hand with drip irrigation, consider the vine and how it might respond to vintage conditions—which, in Napa Valley, often mean heat spikes at the end of the season. With drip, farmers can often work through a heat spike by feeding water to the vine, hydrating it so the leaves and fruit don’t burn. When the water arrives at the surface of the soil, it is grabbed by the roots and transpired out the leaves. The life of the vine is in the trunk, the canes and the leaves.

A dry-farmed vineyard is not sustainable with shallow roots. A heat spike would kill it. The vines require a site in which their roots can go deep enough to find moisture in the soil (noncompacted, living soils retain moisture closer to the surface as well). A dry-farmed vine lives mostly in its roots—where the season is markedly cooler than in the sun.

Williams produces two cabernets entirely from dry-farmed Rutherford fruit, all of it under the supervision of his vineyard manager, Frank Leeds. He labels the larger-production wine Napa Valley, his tighter selection Rutherford. The relatively benign 2007 vintage allowed Williams to create classic Rutherford cabernets at both levels. The heat of 2006 and the abundance of 2005 pre-



John & Rory Williams of Frog's Leap Winery

sented different challenges, and his Napa Valley cabernets reflect these challenges. But not his Rutherford bottlings—another example of how the contemporary selection process often diminishes any significant variation in quality, providing exceptional wines

the closest to the cut that brings the cool air from the Pacific. It’s a relatively flat, five-acre patch of dry-farmed vines along a rocky former creek bed that’s shaded by the surrounding woods and the hills to the west. Diamond Creek flows into a little valley below Gravelly Meadow, splitting Red Rock Terrace, a north-facing slope, from Volcanic Hill, the white tuff that reflects the sun facing south. That white, south-facing hill continues east into Rudy von Strasser’s property and estate vineyard. He also farms Post Vineyard, 200 yards below, in a cool spot of deep alluvial soils.

“The whole Bordeaux vintage analogy will dissolve and it will become much more Burgundian—Napa Valley cabernet will become much more property oriented.”
—Agustin Huneeus, Quintessa

in ’05, ’06 and ’07. When selecting the blend for the Rutherford bottling, Williams says, “I’m not trying to pile things higher. I’m trying to strip everything down and get to a sense of place. So the aromatics are more resonant, the wines have more transparency.”

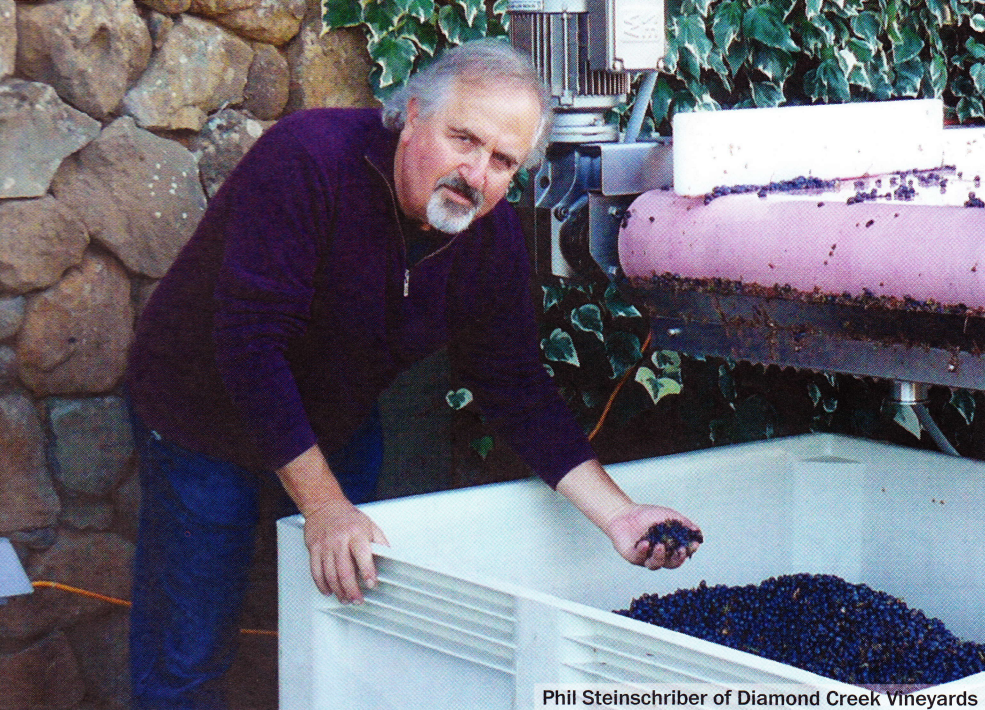
At the north end of the valley, where heat builds in the valley floor, the western hills provide a respite from the extreme temperatures. A cut in the Mayacamas allows cool air and fog to pour over the vineyards of Diamond Mountain, a district of cool woodland streams, manzanita groves and patches of vines. The small community of growers around the old Bonsall Ranch provides some of the most compelling cabernets in the valley; variations within such a small neighborhood make this an ideal spot to study vintage.

Following the neighborhood down the hill, Diamond Creek’s Gravelly Meadow is

As readers may know, I regularly rate the Diamond Creek and several von Strasser cabernets in the highest range for California. In fact, I rated von Strasser’s ’06 Post Vineyard 96 points. But the von Strasser Estate Cabernet and the Diamond Creek wines from that same vintage struck me as anomalies—with a fruit character similar to apricots or peaches.

I’d visited these two producers in 2008 with a group of sommeliers that included Yoon Ha, then at *La Toque* in Napa and now at San Francisco’s *Benu*. I asked him to join me for a return visit to Diamond Mountain, to help me understand what might be happening with vintage expression there.

We started with Rudy von Strasser, tasting his Estate and Post Vineyard cabernets from ’05, ’06 and ’07. Both ’05s were mature,



Phil Steinschriber of Diamond Creek Vineyards

having moved past their primary fruit flavors. Von Strasser said all of his 2005s had a cooler fruit tone, “in the olive and black tea spectrum, rather than cassis or blackberry.”

The '07s were broader, richer wines, the Estate classic with firm, dark fruit, the Post sleek, black and juicy.

The contrast between the '06s was more dramatic. The south-facing estate vineyard produced a bright wine with high tones of apricot and peach. Post, while it carried some high tones, balanced them with bass notes, black fruit and tense tannins. Ha described the Post '06 as composed. “It’s very together, while the Estate isn’t, with everything coming in different intervals.”

We talked about the differences between the two sites—the fact that Post has a significant proportion of clone 7, and that it was 100 percent cabernet in '06 (all the other Diamond Mountain wines we tasted from those three vintages included other varieties). Post is also a cooler, north-facing site that ripens two to three weeks later than the estate vineyard. Von Strasser believes the roots at the estate vineyard are deeper, and though he has not dug soil pits at Post, he thinks there may be a hard pan under the alluvial wash of river rocks that prevents the roots from penetrating. With two adjacent vineyards ripening two to three weeks apart, their response to a heat spike might well produce two very different wines.

At Diamond Creek, we sat down with Boots Brounstein and Phil Steinschriber. Brounstein’s late husband, Al, planted the vineyard in the 1960s, deciding to separate it into three sites before he had made and bottled his first wine. Boots, a spunky octogenarian with short red hair, recalls how Al deter-

mined the differences in the sites based on the color of his clothes after he’d been out working in the vineyards—the white dust of Volcanic Hill or the iron-red dust of Red Rock Terrace. The couple met Steinschriber on a visit to the Golan Heights, where he was making wine in the late 1980s. He moved to Diamond Creek in the early '90s to work the vineyards and make the wines with Al, whose last vintage was 2005.

Boots Brounstein and Steinschriber opened the '05, '06 and '07 wines from each of their three main vineyards; we tasted them first by vintage, then went back and considered each vineyard individually. Steinschriber shared detailed notes on the seasons as we tasted through.

He described 2005 as “a wet spring and a late bloom, a cool-to-warm season with a late and fast harvest.” By fast, he means it lasted two weeks rather than the usual four. His 2005s are the most vibrant wines I tasted from that vintage. Gravelly Meadow is all supple red and blue fruit and gravelly tannin; Red Rock Terrace has a violet and raspberry perfume, both zesty and meaty at once (it’s the most like a satisfying food). Volcanic Hill is the earthiest, biggest and richest of the 2005s, its rose volume turned up high.

A major heat wave hit Napa Valley in July of 2006. At Diamond Creek, “Temperatures reached 113° to 114° and lasted a good week to ten days,” said Steinschriber. “Harvest was late, but not as late as 2005—we finished on October 31. The sugars were higher, the crop a little larger than average, while 2005 was a lot larger.”

Gravelly Meadow, the coolest of the three sites, produced the most balanced 2006, with vibrant dark plum flavors and touches of peach and persimmon. That

peachiness is more overt in Red Rock Terrace, along with violet florals and austere tannins. Volcanic Hill is now the most integrated of the three wines, with high notes of strawberry and peach, and darker, fruit-scented tannins underneath.

In 2007, Steinschriber recorded a normal crop, with berries smaller than normal and lower juice yields. It was warmer overall, with higher sugars at harvest. All three wines hit in the vintage—the earthy blueberry and floral scents of Gravelly Meadow bathed in seductive richness, the darker purple and blackberry flavors of Red Rock showing primary oak, Volcanic Hill packed with currants that joust with its tannin. Ha described Volcanic Hill as “the big guy, a wine with architecture and serious carpentry.”

Steinschriber finds the 2007s more concentrated overall, expressing more dark fruits. In 2006, the high temperatures in July might have adversely affected flavor development in some of the grapes. He finds the 2006s a little leaner: “Maybe that expresses the cooler temperatures in early spring.” And 2005, he suggests, may express the later harvest and the length of time on the vines.



Rudy von Strasser

There are infinite variables and hypotheses. What strikes me is that unless you consider a single site, there are few clear patterns. As Boots Brounstein said of her own three wines, “All the vineyards respond to the vintage differently.” Magnify that over the length and breadth of the valley, and making a pronouncement about vintage is little more than cant. ■