

Diamond Creek 1981 Volcanic Hill Cabernet Sauvignon

In 1967 Al Brounstein, successful in pharmaceuticals, aspired to grow Cabernet. Not knowing where to do so, he asked America's most famous winemaker, Russian-born Andre Tchelistcheff, for advice. "Go to Diamond Mountain," instructed the maestro. Obeying, he bought a 79-acre chunk of Napa mountain land above the fog line and hidden behind a net of copper Madrona trees. The story goes that Brounstein smuggled in some cuttings from Bordeaux and sunk them into 20 acres of cleared land. The man, his wife, Boots, and that land became a California legend.

Diamond Creek was the first commercial winery on the mountain since prohibition and Brounstein's was the first Napa Valley winery to devote itself exclusively to Cabernet. And while the initial vintage, 1972, cost \$18, the wine was the first West Coast batch to breach the \$100 mark. In other words, the BrouNSTEINS birthed the blockbuster Napa Cabernet syndrome.

Of Diamond Creek's three distinct vineyards, the fiercest, the most tannic, the most marvelously mountain, is Volcanic Hill. Aptly named, its volcanic ash soils can act like a grapevine air conditioner, which was handy for the hot and precocious 1981 vintage. Early ripening, which often means imbalance, is not a godsend, but Volcanic Hill's soils allowed for slower maturation. Tasted just recently, the wine sang, thumbing its nose in the face of some Twittering folk who warned the Cabernet might have fallen apart. The aroma was piercing, the graphite compelling. A sip—or in this case a bottle—and a delicious dehydrated prune (think hamantaschen filling), sweetened with a memory of acacia honey, made the wine go down easy. In deep critic mode, I'd say: With stuffing and structure, some sheepy lanolin, and finished like a cloud. Tchelistcheff was right.—Alice Feiring

Alice Feiring is a wine writer who has written for Food & Wine, among other publications. She is also the author of "The Battle for Wine and Love." Visit her Web site at alicefeiring.com.