Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

The Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series

Albert Brounstein

DIAMOND CREEK VINEYARDS: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *TERROIR* IN THE VINEYARD

Interviews Conducted by
Carole Hicke
in 1998

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

****

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Albert Brounstein, "Diamond Creek Vineyards: The Significance of *Terroir* in the Vineyard," an oral history conducted in 1998 by Carole Hicke, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2000.

Copy no. _____

Cataloging Information

BROUNSTEIN, ALBERT (b. 1920) Owner, Diamond Creek Vineyards

Diamond Creek Vineyards: The Significance of Terroir in the Vineyard, 2000, ix, 82 pp.

Childhood and education in Minnesota; early work experiences, May's Department Store in Los Angeles; managing inventories, developing Standard Drug Distributors; Diamond Creek Vineyards startup, purchasing and developing the vineyards; importance of *terroir*; microclimates and differentiating the vineyards; quality and pricing of the wine.

Interviewed in 1998 by Carole Hicke for the Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series, the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

TABLE OF CONTENTS--Albert Brounstein

PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated by Ruth Teiser in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstituted as The Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed has been made by a committee consisting of the director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Carole Hicke, series project director; and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

Until her death in June 1994, Ruth Teiser was project originator, initiator, director, and conductor of the greater part of the oral histories. Her book, Winemaking in California, co-authored with Catherine Harroun and published in 1982, was the product of more than forty years of research, interviewing, and photographing. (Those wine history files are now in The Bancroft Library for researcher use.) Ruth Teiser's expertise and knowledge of the wine industry contributed significantly to the documenting of its history in this series.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grapegrowing and winemaking that has existed only in the memories of winemen. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial winemaking did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his or her own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of materials readily available for the purpose.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Carole Hicke
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California Wine
Oral History Series

July 1998
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY INTERVIEWS
Interviews Completed as of September 2000

Leon D. Adams, *Revitalizing the California Wine Industry*, 1974

Leon D. Adams, *California Wine Industry Affairs: Recollections and Opinions*, 1990

Maynard A. Amerine, *The University of California and the State's Wine Industry*, 1971

Maynard A. Amerine, *Wine Bibliographies and Taste Perception Studies*, 1988

Richard L. Arrowood, *Sonoma County Winemaking: Chateau St. Jean and Arrowood Vineyards & Winery*, 1996

William Andrew Beckstoffer, *Premium California Vineyardist, Entrepreneur, 1960s to 2000s*, 2000

Philo Biane, *Wine Making in Southern California and Recollections of Fruit Industries, Inc.*, 1972

William Bonetti, *A Life of Winemaking at Wineries of Gallo, Schenley, Charles Krug, Chateau Souverain, and Sonoma-Cutrer*, 1998

Albert Brounstein, *Diamond Creek Vineyards: The Significance of Terroir in the Vineyard*, 2000

Charles A. Carpy, *Viticulture and Enology at Freemark Abbey*, 1994

John B. Cella, *The Cella Family in the California Wine Industry*, 1986

Charles Crawford, *Recollections of a Career with the Gallo Winery and the Development of the California Wine Industry, 1942-1989*, 1990

Burke H. Critchfield, Carl F. Wente, and Andrew G. Frericks, *The California Wine Industry During the Depression*, 1972

William V. Cruess, *A Half Century of Food and Wine Technology*, 1967

Jack and Jamie Peterman Davies, *Rebuilding Schramsberg: The Creation of a California Champagne House*, 1990

William A. Dieppe, *Almaden is My Life*, 1985

Paul Draper, *History and Philosophy of Winemaking at Ridge Vineyards: 1970s-1990s*, 1994

Daniel J. and Margaret S. Duckhorn, *Mostly Merlot: The History of Duckhorn Vineyards*, 1996

David, Jean, Peter, and Steven Ficklin, *Making California Port Wine: Ficklin Vineyards from 1948 to 1992*, 1992

Brooks Firestone, *Firestone Vineyard: A Santa Ynez Valley Pioneer*, 1996

Louis J. Foppiano, *A Century of Agriculture and Winemaking in Sonoma County, 1896-1996*, 1996

Alfred Fromm, *Marketing California Wine and Brandy*, 1984

Louis Gomberg, *Analytical Perspectives on the California Wine Industry, 1935-1990*, 1990

Miljenko Grgich, *A Croatian-American Winemaker in the Napa Valley*, 1992

Joseph E. Heitz, *Creating a Winery in the Napa Valley*, 1986

William H. Hill, *Vineyard Development and the William Hill Winery, 1970s-1990s*, 1998

Agustin Huneeus, *A World View of the Wine Industry*, 1996

Maynard A. Joslyn, *A Technologist Views the California Wine Industry*, 1974

Amandus N. Kasimatis, *A Career in California Viticulture*, 1988

Morris Katz, *Paul Masson Winery Operations and Management, 1944-1988*, 1990

Legh F. Knowles, Jr., *Beaulieu Vineyards from Family to Corporate Ownership*, 1990

Horace O. Lanza and Harry Baccigaluppi, *California Grape Products and Other Wine Enterprises*, 1971

Zelma R. Long, *The Past is the Beginning of the Future: Simi Winery in its Second Century*, 1992

Richard Maher, *California Winery Management and Marketing*, 1992

Louis M. Martini and Louis P. Martini, *Wine Making in the Napa Valley*, 1973

Arpaxat Setrakian, *A. Setrakian, a Leader of the San Joaquin Valley Grape Industry*, 1977

Elie Skofis, *California Wine and Brandy Maker*, 1988

David S. Stare, *Fumé Blanc and Meritage Wines in Sonoma County: Dry Creek Vineyard's Pioneer Winemaking*, 1996

Rodney S. Strong, *Rodney Strong Vineyards: Creative Winemaking and Winery Management in Sonoma County*, 1994

Andre Tchelistcheff, *Grapes, Wine, and Ecology*, 1983

Brother Timothy, *The Christian Brothers as Wine Makers*, 1974

Janet and John Trefethen, *Trefethen Vineyards, 1968-1998*, 1998

Louis (Bob) Trinchero, *California Zinfandels, a Success Story*, 1992

Charles F. Wagner and Charles J. Wagner, *Caymus Vineyards: A Father-Son Team Producing Distinctive Wines*, 1994

The Wente Family and the California Wine Industry, interviews with Jean, Carolyn, Philip, and Eric Wente, 1992

Ernest A. Wente, *Wine Making in the Livermore Valley*, 1971

Warren Winiarski, *Creating Classic Wines in the Napa Valley*, 1994

Albert J. Winkler, *Viticultural Research at UC Davis (1921-1971)*, 1973

Frank M. Woods, *Founding Clos Du Bois Winery: A Marketing Approach,* 1998

John H. Wright, *Domaine Chandon: The First French-owned California Sparkling Wine Cellar*, includes an interview with Edmond Maudière, 1992

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Albert Brounstein

Many wine lovers clamor for the bottles produced by Al Brounstein at Diamond Creek Vineyards. Not only is the wine highly regarded, but Diamond Creek Vineyards is a unique study in microclimates and *terroir*. Four separate vineyards have soils and climates that differ radically from each other. Brounstein bottles separately the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes grown on each of the four, thus affording an opportunity to taste and evaluate the effects soil and climate have on the wine.

Born and brought up in Minnesota, Brounstein studied business in college, then went to work for department stores, first in Minneapolis, then in Los Angeles. His enterprising outlook soon led him to establish his own business managing inventories for client drugstores.

With the help of his wife, "Boots" Brounstein, but fighting against a great many nay-sayers, Brounstein bought his vineyards on Diamond Mountain, above the spa town of Calistoga at the head of Napa Valley. Cabernet Sauvignon was the best grape grown in the Valley, he thought, and that's what he would grow. When he began bottling the wine, it became much sought after, and he now has more customers than he has wine.

In this oral history, Brounstein details some of the challenges he and Boots have faced: fire, flood, loss of financing, lack of storage facilities. For a time he had probably the world's only bonded driveway, since the BATF found the driveway was the only space he had to bottle wine.

Brounstein was interviewed on December 21 and 22, 1998, in his brand-new office just built over his winery--already decorated with Italian tiled floors, warm wood colors, a beautiful 17th or 18th century table, an old painted chest.

On my arrival he drove me around the four vineyards, pointing to where the soils and climates differed, and where he had built a dam and nine waterfalls. He planted the Lake Vineyard in rows of eight feet by eight feet--instead of the more usual eight feet by twelve feet--because, as he said, he didn't want the view from the lake to be of all dirt, which it would have been with the wider spacing. It may be another first--the first vineyard to be planted for its scenic aspect, rather than its viability.

He is very much the hands-on farmer, taking great care with the vines, and still moving stones. His idea of a break in the interview as to go outside to check the progress of his ninth waterfall. Boots Brounstein joined us occasionally and contributed valuable information.

Brounstein reviewed the draft transcript, then had a second look after the corrections were made.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Willa K. Baum, Division Head, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Carole Hicke
Interviewer/Editor

March 2000
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT BROUNSTEIN

I BACKGROUND AND GROWING UP IN MINNESOTA

[Date of interview: December 21, 1998]
[Recorded at Diamond Creek Winery. Mrs. Albert B. "Boots" Brounstein also present.] ##[1]

Childhood and Early Education

Hicke: Let's start with when and where you were born.

Brounstein: I was born in Canada in a little town called Runnymeade in Saskatchewan Province. That was on February 17, 1920.

Hicke: And did you grow up there?

Brounstein: I spent the first seven months of my life there, and I told my mother I didn't like the girls, so we moved to Minneapolis.

Hicke: That was accommodating of her, and observant of you!

Brounstein: Oh, I was very precocious. [laughter] What happened was, my dad, who was a wheat farmer, was hired by a fellow named Sam Bronfman to sell Seagram's products into the United States, and they were very well received, because in those days, the average person who liked alcohol had to be content with what they called moonshine wine, moonshine booze.

Hicke: It was Prohibition days.

Brounstein: That's right. So now, they were able to have this marvelous Canadian whiskey, and so my dad was very successful, as was, of course, Sam Bronfman.

---

[1] ## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Hicke: But in the 1920s, are you saying that he imported Canadian whiskey?

Brounstein: My dad was a salesman for Seagram's from Canada into the United States, and he was positioned in Minneapolis, and then he had the states of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Those states were his beat, his route. He was very successful. As was just anybody else in the bootleg business in those days.

Hicke: Yes. So you grew up in Minneapolis?

Brounstein: Yes. I wasn't a citizen until I was eighteen years old.

Hicke: Oh, and you had to choose then?

Brounstein: I got what they call a derivative certificate from the United States government. Until then, I was an alien, until my dad became a citizen, he had trouble because of his background--alcohol. But he finally made it as a citizen, and when he did, I was conferred citizenship on the derivative basis.

Hicke: I see. Well, let me ask you about your education. You went to grade school there?

Brounstein: Yes, and to high school, and to university, four years at the University of Minnesota. I majored in marketing and advertising, and I graduated with a master of business administration degree. That was in 1942.

Hicke: 1942. Let me back up and ask you what you remember about your childhood: what kinds of family occasions were there, and what kinds of school things did you do?

Brounstein: We were not an outgoing family. We just did what everybody else seemed to do, and we weren't innovative. I used to like building model airplanes, and I did a lot of flying then. As a matter of fact, when I was twelve years old, my dad financed a trip for me for about ten minutes in an open biplane. That was my first experience, and I loved it. But then just a few months after going up with this pilot, he got killed in an airplane crash, and that sort of stifled me somewhat, and certainly my parents. My mother wouldn't even let me have a bicycle. So she was really conservative about what happened to her precious little son.

Hicke: Oh, sure, sure. I can understand that.

Brounstein: But I used to skate and ski, and kill myself in those winter sports.

Hicke: Where did you ski?

Brounstein: Well, Glenwood Park, right nearby, about four or five blocks from our house, there was a place called Theodore Worth Park. I used to go tobogganing and sledding and skating along the creek. There was a nice creek there. But every once in a while, while we were skating on the rubbery ice, somebody would suddenly disappear, and down they'd go in that creek, and we'd have to build a fire.

Hicke: Did you ever fall through?

Brounstein: I didn't, but my friends did. I once went on a toboggan slide so that when you left this little slide, you'd be flying through the air on this sled, but when it came down, you'd come down with a thud. I had my tongue sticking out, and wham! I bit right through my tongue. I almost lost the tongue. That was quite an experience. I had to walk home, and blood was streaming from my mouth. It was real traumatic. I haven't forgotten that.

But I used to get banged up in the summertime. Although I didn't have my own bicycle, I'd borrow a neighbor's bike, and I tried to stand on the handles. And down I'd go, and I've got the marks to show it.

Hicke: Scars all over!

Brounstein: Yes. But I guess we were sort of adventuresome. Well, we used to steal apples, for one thing. [laughter] In those days, that was terrible.

Hicke: That was the height of criminality in those days.

Brounstein: Yes, it was, especially if the farmer would catch you and give you a couple of whacks as you went flying over that fence to get out of there. So it would discourage us somewhat. We were a little bit mischievous, but not too bad.

Hicke: Well, you've got to have a challenge.

Brounstein: Oh, yes.

Hicke: What kinds of things did you like in school? Like English, or history, or math?

Brounstein: No, I wasn't too crazy about that. No, not math. I guess my aim in school was to get out of school.

Hicke: Recess?

Brounstein: Yes, I liked that, that was fun. And I'll tell you, I wasn't that great a student. I think I was B+ average, something like that.

Hicke: Well, that's not bad at all.

Brounstein: Yes, but I was just doing what had to be done and getting it over with. Of course, we didn't have TV in those days, but we did have Jack Benny [radio], but only once a week. So we had no excuse for not getting our homework done. But we were pretty conscientious really, and we did want to succeed, even then. As we do now.

Hicke: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Brounstein: Yes, I had two sisters, one two years older than I and one younger.

Hicke: What are their names, Al?

Brounstein: Edith is older than I and Shirley, my younger sister, died at the age of fifty-one. She was three years younger. She was a doll, wonderful gal. Miss her.

Hicke: Then when you were in high school, did you know what you wanted to do, or where you wanted to work?

Brounstein: No, I didn't. I certainly didn't know that I wanted to be in the wine business. That was the one thing furthest from my mind in Minneapolis.

College and Part-time Work

Hicke: Did you know you wanted to go to college?

Brounstein: Yes, I knew we had to go to college in order to be--if you don't go to college, you're not going to go anywhere. So I went, and I used to get pretty good grades. I think I was in the upper eleventh or twelfth percentile, something like that.

Hicke: Where did you go to college?

Brounstein: University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

Hicke: How did you decide on that?

Brounstein: Well, that was the only college around. There were private schools, but no, this was the public school. There were schools up north, but we would never consider them. I mean, it was all we could do to pay forty-five dollars a semester, especially when you were working for twenty-five cents an hour.

Hicke: Oh, that's a good question: what did you do?

Brounstein: I used to work at the University of Minnesota Hospital. I used to do gofer type things.

Hicke: Errands?

Brounstein: Errands, and I cut up rods for stirring. I don't recall what they called them. But I used to have to deliver stuff to the various different areas, and I'd be a delivery boy.

Hicke: Was the hospital somewhere near the university?

Brounstein: Oh, yes, right next to it.

Hicke: Oh, it was part of it, okay.

Brounstein: University hospital. I did that for a couple of years, and at the same time, I worked at a drugstore, which was not necessarily close to my home. It took about half an hour to get to my home. This was in a very rough part of town, and the people would come in, they'd be sliced up--you know, their husbands would whack at them with the knife if they got a little upset with them. They'd be what they called dehorns. They'd drink denatured alcohol, and they drank Sterno. Sterno is a means of heating up stoves. They would strain it through rye bread and then take the alcohol out of that. They were called dehorns because they would take denatured alcohol like that and drink it. And then what it did to their brain, I don't know, but they were not the leaders of the community.

Hicke: And people would go to the drugstore instead of going to a doctor?

Brounstein: Oh, yes. In the middle of the night, some people would come in in their bare feet in the winter time with their night clothes on, and needing protection by the police from their assailants, their own family. It was a rough area.

Hicke: How did you get that job?

Brounstein: Oh, I'd take anything at that time. But it was a part-time job, and so I'd go to school, and I'd work at the hospital, and in the evening I'd go to this--well, sometimes first you'd have dinner and then go to the drugstore, and do some sugars, make some sodas, malts, as well as taking care of the sales, except for the back end, of course. The pharmacist was always on duty. There I was in front, and he in the back. We kept that store open for--well, it stayed open many years after I was gone.

Hicke: You didn't get a lot of sleep in those days.

Brounstein: No, I really didn't. We got a lot of walking exercise. The worst part was in the winter time, sometimes as much as 35 below zero. We had to go--that was mostly my high school days.

Hicke: Did you work at the drugstore when you went to high school?

Brounstein: No, not then, so much. But I am reminded of those days when in high school, when I would walk from the school, the junior high--yes, that's right, I was in junior high then, and we had to walk about a mile and a half in the bitter cold. So 35 below, and we didn't have the best clothing in those days. I had to have hand-me-downs. My uncle would hand me down his used coats, undercoats and so forth.

Hicke: They weren't down jackets, though, were they?

Brounstein: No, I don't think so. And let's see. I know we had some awful frostbitten fingers in those days.

Hicke: When you went to college, how did you decide what to major in?

Brounstein: Well, I somehow or other felt business was the thing to be involved in. I didn't know what kind of business. At one time I was considering being a civil engineer, but I really didn't know what a civil engineer did, but it sounded nice. So I wound up finally in business, and I took marketing and advertising as a minor. It was enjoyable. I learned about--let's see, political science, some calculus, mathematics, accounting, and law, we had a little bit of law. Business law.

Hicke: Business law?

Brounstein: So those were some of the subjects we took. It was interesting.

Hicke: Did anything that you took there, any courses, prove to be particularly helpful for the rest of your career?

Brounstein: Well, I like to kid that the one thing I learned of most importance to me was that if you buy something for a dollar and you sell it for four dollars, you made 40 percent. So I have these figures, I think that's probably the secret of my success. I can distill all that I learned from the university down to that: buy for a dollar, sell for four dollars, and you've made 40 percent. Who would deny you 40 percent? [laughter]

Hicke: Well, that was worth money.

Brounstein: Yes, I can kid about it now. But it was a good lesson to learn.

II EARLY WORK EXPERIENCES

Donaldson's Department Store

Hicke: Now you graduated in which year?

Brounstein: I graduated in 1942, and I entered in, I think, was it '38? Yes, I think so. '38 to '42. But I had an ulcer and they wouldn't take me in the service, so I was in the national guard protecting the women and children. Mostly the women.

Hicke: We needed it! So what did you do when you were about to graduate from college? You were looking for a job?

Brounstein: Well, I was hired by the president of the local department store called Donaldson's. They were bought out by Federated Stores, and they were second only to Dayton's. I was the marketing manager for the basement store. I was first the buyer for the women's and children's clothing, of all things. I used to buy for the ten- to fourteen-year-old.

May's Department Store in Los Angeles

Brounstein: Then when I left Minneapolis and I went to a department store in Los Angeles, I went to May's, and they put me into the bedding department, the sheets and pillowcases. I couldn't stand that too long--

Hicke: Wait a minute, we're going too fast here. How long did you stay with Donaldson's?

Brounstein: Donaldson's, I was there a couple of years. They were upset when I told them I was leaving to go to Los Angeles.

Hicke: Why did you leave?

Brounstein: Because I had been dating a gal, not that serious but somewhat serious, and she was moving to Los Angeles. So in the middle of winter, I decided I'd like to see whether I really was serious about her or not, so I went to Los Angeles, and although I didn't like the gal, I did like the weather. I decided I'd better come back to Los Angeles, to California, and I'm here.

Hicke: Did you just come out here and hunt around for a job?

Brounstein: Yes, I didn't have a job. I just came out. I took a chance, and the first thing I did was land in the candy department at the May Company, but I didn't like that. I mean, I had just so much fill of candy after a while, I said this is not for me, and I switched to another department.

Hicke: What were you doing? Selling, or buying?

Brounstein: Yes, I was in selling and little stuff.

Hicke: And all the candy you could eat.

Brounstein: Yes. Then I went up to the bedding department, and there I stayed about six months or so.

Managing Inventories: An Innovative Enterprise

Brounstein: I really didn't like the department store game. I didn't like the politics.

Hicke: What politics?

Brounstein: Politics. I mean, either you were buddy-buddy with the president of the company and you shot up in a hurry, or else you were kept down, and I just didn't like to have to be under constant review.

So I went to work for a wholesaler of--well, it turned out they eventually went to drug supplies, but this was mostly the beginning, it was into beauty products and things like that.

Hicke: What was the name of this company?

Brounstein: It was called Biltmore Beauty Supply. I did that for about a year, and then we gradually drifted into selling to bigger operations like Thrifty Drugstores, and Owl, Rexall, and Sav-On. I developed that for my boss. I was strictly on a commission basis, never got a salary, never got expenses, strictly on commission. But I learned enough about the business that I decided to go out on my own.

I borrowed $300 on a used car that I had, and I started that business. I knew about the resources and I knew the customers, so I built that up from that. I built it up, and eventually I had about fourteen employees. I had my own warehouse. The bigger it got, the less I liked it.

Hicke: Now, wait a minute, I want to back up. Why were you successful in building this up?

Brounstein: Well, I did a unit control type of operation, where I would come in, take inventory of the druggists' supply of what they call the proprietary items--

Hicke: You mean you'd go into the drugstore?

Brounstein: Yes. I was now strictly in the drugstores. I would be in charge of his proprietories, things like aspirins and cold medicines that are advertised on TV all the time. So they put me in charge; every drugstore would say, "Take it over, and just run it, and give me turnover." Because I was telling them, "Look, you've got these goods that have been sitting here for years, and you've got your money tied up. Let me free it for you." I did that, I showed them how they could turn their inventory and make money on turnover.

Hicke: So you managed their inventories.

Brounstein: Yes. I'd come in, I'd have my clerks and my salespeople take inventory. They'd bring the inventory to me, and then I'd fill in the amounts that the stores needed, and they depended on me. They trusted me, and it worked out pretty good.

Hicke: You had to then keep count of their sales--

Brounstein: Of every sale, and then I would replace it in proportion of the way it sold.

Hicke: What kind of a computing apparatus--

Brounstein: We didn't have any computers. We just had spaces on a lot of sheets of paper, and we'd be filling in quantities. Then I'd

take those papers home night after night, I'd be filling in the amount that we had to order for them. It worked out pretty fine. I had a bunch of employees.

Hicke: Were there other people doing this kind of thing?

Brounstein: Yes, well, the big thing was McKesson Drug and then L.A. Drug, Los Angeles Drug, and Brunswick Drug. Those were the big guys. And then there was a bunch of little guys, but nobody was doing what I was.

Hicke: That's what I meant. These were the drugstores that you were helping out, but nobody was managing inventories as a separate business.

Brounstein: Yes. But then after a while, they caught on, and then they, especially the big guys, they were going to act--they went out after my accounts, because I was doing pretty good. I was doing over a million dollars worth of business.

Hicke: That's what happens when you're successful.

Brounstein: Yes, and so they would come in and they'd offer special cabinets, like this cabinet here. And I couldn't afford to spend thousands of dollars, tie up my money in cabinets, and they could, because they had other drugs beside proprietaries.

Hicke: And deep pockets.

Beginning Interest in Wine

Brounstein: Yes, deep pockets. Just at the time when I had decided to go to France on vacation, and I was studying the language so that I'd know how to talk to these people, I saw this course being offered by the University of California in Los Angeles--a seminar on wine tasting. I said to my wife--Boots and I weren't married then; my first wife died when she was forty-one.

Hicke: What was her name?

Brounstein: That was Nancy. I said, "Why would anyone want to have anything besides Paul Masson Vin Rosé?" So I thought I'd take that course and see what it's all about. I did, and at the end of the course, I said, "Why would anyone want to ever drink the Paul Masson Vin Rosé?"

Hicke: How did you start drinking Paul Masson?

Brounstein: Oh, it's like people do White Zinfandel today. It was the popular thing to do. It was a rosé--simple, easy, soft, gentle little wine. It was innocuous, and we thought it was great. Little did we know. Once we learned, then it was different.

Hicke: Who taught this course?

Brounstein: He was an attorney, but his hobby was wine. He was a writer. He used to write about wine, and so he was very sought after by all the suppliers in those days, because he had a column in the Los Angeles Times, very widely read column. So I told him at the end of the course, "You know, this sounds like a fun way to go. I'd like to just put up a little vineyard and just sell the grapes and have a quiet, peaceful life." He said, "Don't do it. You'll never make any money, you'll only lose, and I would advise you not to do it."

So I didn't take his advice.

##

Brounstein: But I did meet a very important fellow--I found out he was important. He was the vice president of Ridge Vineyards. He asked me to become a member of his tasting society, Hollywood Wine and Food Society.

Hicke: What was his name?

Brounstein: His name was Dick Foster, Richard Foster. He had a business in Los Angeles, Dayton Time Lock, it was called. They would have major burglar alarm systems. That's what he was into. Every time I'd have a discussion with my attorney, I'd be down in the dumps, because he was a negative man. I had to have a meeting with Dick, and he'd bolster me up. My consultant told me, "Don't plant Cabernet." Remember I was telling you [off tape]? "You should plant Zinfandel."

So I told this to Dick. I said, "I don't want Zinfandel. I want Cabernet. I want the best." He said, "You should do that. If that's what you want, do it."

Travel to Italy and France

Hicke: Let's back up here a minute, now. Why did you decide to go to France?

Brounstein: We thought it would be nice to take a trip. I had no interest at all at that time in wine. My wife died shortly after that. I took a trip to Italy and to France, and it was for my business. It was called Standard Drug Distributors, and I was at 4622 Magnolia in Burbank.

Boots B.: That's when he went into business for himself. When he was in business for himself is when he and Nancy went to Italy to look for wigs.

Brounstein: That's right.

Hicke: To look for hair wigs?

Brounstein: That's right.

Boots B.: Yes. He had to have a reason for going. [laughs]

Brounstein: I was selling a lot of hair products, shampoos, things like that. That's all proprietaries on television. You know, they did a lot of advertising, stuff like that. Anyway, so I decided I'd try wigs, and I went to Italy.

Hicke: Was Italy the place to get wigs?

Brounstein: Well, it was at the time, but I just couldn't get involved with it. Too big an investment. You had to have all those colors, and different sizes, and it was just too much of an investment for just one part of the business. It wasn't that easy to make sales.

Hicke: But this you concluded after you made the trip to Italy?

Brounstein: Yes. I found out it really wasn't for me. I took a sample order, and we finally sold it, but it indicated that that was not for me, as were other things.

Hicke: At the same time you went to Italy, then, you went to France?

Brounstein: Yes, and--let's see. We didn't do much there. We went to the Louvre and all that.

Hicke: Did you go to the wine country?

Brounstein: No, not that time. But then after my wife died, I went back there by myself, and I went to Montmartre, and I had a little beret that I bought, so I looked French. I sat there in an art class, and I was doing life drawings with charcoal. I was quite an artist in those days.

Hicke: So how long did you spend in Paris?

Brounstein: Oh, I'd say two or three weeks at the most. But it was lonely without a wife. It was fun and exciting, but lonely.

Hicke: And did you drink some French wine?

Brounstein: Yes, I did, but not much. I wasn't really into it at that time. But I did get into it--yes, about that time.

Hicke: I'm just getting ready to put another tape here.

Brounstein: Yes, I'm talking too much.

Hicke: It's hard to interview somebody who won't talk. [laughter] That's what we're here for, you know.

Brounstein: Oh, yes, that's true.

Hicke: So you didn't get really interested in wine when you were in France?

Brounstein: No, I don't think the timing was at that point. Let's see, wait a second. I was interested, because I remember talking to Nancy about having a vineyard, and she said she didn't think she'd like to be isolated in the vineyard away from the world. Of course, I don't think anyone would feel that Boots is isolated and away from the world right here, would you?

Hicke: No, I think you're in the center of the world right here.

Brounstein: Yes. That's the way it turned out. Nancy would have loved it too.

So anyway, so I'm really not sure about that trip, but I don't recall going to wineries in France at that time. No, I don't think I did. It was at a later time.

Hicke: I'm just talking to Boots about Al, and you were saying how creative he's been.

Boots B.: Well, he's so creative and artistic, because he's had no training for gardening, and it's his joy and his love, and his

home in southern California just had these beautiful, beautiful gardens. In fact, that's where we got married almost thirty years ago. Long time ago. So we came up here to this property, and it was just raw land. There was nothing here, there were no vines, no nothing. He created the vineyards and all of the beautiful gardens and waterfalls. He's an Aquarius, and loves water, and married a Pisces, which I am. So he loves running water.

Hicke: Yes, he showed me the waterfalls.

Boots B.: Yes, the waterfalls. He loves to create, which he's doing there, and he's never had any training.

Hicke: Yes, he's out there now helping move the dirt around.

Boots B.: Right, and he is in charge of where every single rock goes. He oversees it. [tape interruption] [to Brounstein] We were just saying how you are such a water person and love waterfalls and running water, and how this was raw land when we purchased it.

More About Standard Drug Distributors

Hicke: Okay, so we're still in southern California now.

Brounstein: Yes, and how did I get onto that?

Hicke: You were just talking about your beauty supply business.

Brounstein: Oh, yes, and how it gravitated to drugs.

Hicke: Okay, how did it gravitate to drugs?

Brounstein: And became the Standard Drug Distributors.

Hicke: Oh, yes. Were you distributing beauty supplies also?

Brounstein: At one time I did; actually, I did that while I was working for the other guy, Biltmore Beauty Supply. Then I had this other aspect--I didn't like calling on beauty shops, so I'm the one who started calling on drugstores, so it was easy, because this guy that I worked for never, never would go into one of those stores. So I was the guy who set it up, and I took all the business away from him, because he hadn't

developed it, and it was my business. In essence, I felt that way about it.

But I wouldn't want somebody who worked for me to do what I did to him.

Hicke: About what year are we in now when you started your own business?

Brounstein: I was thirty-one years old.

Hicke: Okay, so '20 and thirty-one makes it about 1951.

Brounstein: '51, yes. But I was forty-seven years old when I bought my land up here.

Hicke: What's happening between the time you were thirty-one to forty-seven? Was that your own business all that time?

Brounstein: That was my business. I was financing it, and the banks had to help me tremendously. But I never had partners at either of my two businesses. I don't have a partner here, and I didn't have a partner in the other one.

Hicke: What bank were you dealing with in Los Angeles?

Brounstein: That was Union Bank in Los Angeles, but up here, I started off with Wells Fargo Bank, but I'll tell you about that later on.

Hicke: Okay, good.

Brounstein: Because that was a very important thing that he did to me, kicked me out. But that's another story.

Hicke: Okay, we'll get into that when we get up here. But let's finish with the earlier days. So you took the UCLA wine appreciation course?

Brounstein: Yes, and I told the man that I'd like to have a quiet, simple life. He told me, "Don't do it, you'll only lose money," and he was right, because I lost money for fifteen years. By that I mean I didn't always lose money; it was called negative cash flow. And that sounds pretty.

Hicke: It's much better than losing money.

Brounstein: It's cash is flowing, so what's wrong with a little cash flowing? But then when it means you're losing money, I'd walk into the bank and I'd say, "I need another forty, fifty

thousand, and I'll pay you next year," he says, "But that's what you said last year." So that went on for fifteen years of losing money. But that's another story.

III DIAMOND CREEK VINEYARDS

Decision to Start Up

Hicke: Well, let's back up here. You decided to go against the best advice to buy a vineyard, is that right?

Brounstein: Yes, but it wasn't that easy, because I didn't buy the vineyard for a couple of years. I started looking around, primarily in southern California, because I wanted to locate around San Diego because of the weather. I used to have my own airplane then. I was doing pretty good, I didn't realize it. I had a plane and I also used to love sailing. I figured this would be a nice place to live. I'd be able to sail and fly most of the year.

But I found out that you can't make good Cabernet [Sauvignon] down in San Diego, so I started looking farther north, and that's when I ran into Ridge Vineyards. First there was David Bruce, and I chatted several times with him. But Ridge would allow me to come up weekends and during the crush, I'd be able to pick grapes, and I'd see the way they handled the wine and what they did.

Hicke: Why were you only interested in Cabernet?

Brounstein: Because it was the best in the industry, and I didn't want to have second best. I figured, if I'm going to get involved, I want to be involved with the very best I can do. Well, that's another story--should I tell you about it now?

Hicke: Yes.

Obtaining Cuttings

Brounstein: I still had the same attorney around at the time, and I said I wanted to get some cuttings from France. I tried to do that through the University of California at Davis, but they said, "Well, we can't do that that simply. We would have to index the wine, the vines." By indexing, that meant that they'd have to put them in quarantine for six years, and then even at that, they said, "You probably wouldn't be able to do it, because we have Cabernet now." There were about fifteen different clones of Cabernet, and they had two or three of them already at the University of California at Davis, and where they got them, of course we never know.

Hicke: And you didn't want to use those?

Brounstein: All I know is I wanted to have the best, and so I made arrangements with two of the First Growths of France--you know about the First Growths?

Hicke: Yes.

Brounstein: There's five First Growths.

Hicke: Which two?

Brounstein: I can't tell you. I made a promise not to divulge their names, and I've kept it, that I'll never try to trade on their reputation. As a matter of fact--well, I'll tell you about that later, but I was invited to France recently, and I spoke to the two people who sent me their budwood, and I told them, I said, "You know, we're here with the thirty of supposedly the most prestigious wineries of the world, and I promised you when I got your cuttings that I would not say where I got them. Would you object if I were to reveal my source?" And they both said, "We would rather you didn't." They said the politics would be terrible. Everyone would be pounding on their door asking for that, and at the time, they did it for a certain reason that hasn't presented itself since that time.

Hicke: Can you tell me why they did this for you?

Brounstein: Well, they didn't do it for me, they did it for somebody else whom I was close to. They didn't know me from Adam, but they knew this other person, and he was very influential in the sale of their products in the United States. So it was a combination of him to procure the cuttings, and another person who would act as my intermediary in Mexico, and then the fact

that I used to ski and have an airplane, I was able to hide the material in--do you want to hear that story?

Hicke: Yes, and if you want to, you can seal this part of the transcript.

Brounstein: Well, it's now beyond the statute of limitations. Otherwise, I wouldn't say anything about it. But frankly, I brought in the healthiest vines this country has ever seen. I mean, we've survived through phylloxera, through nematodes, through Pierce's disease. We have a very healthy vineyard out there, as you see when you peek out my door here.

Hicke: Yes, I saw.

Brounstein: They are so healthy that we even had the temerity to rip out perfectly healthy vines down below at the lowest part of that particular vineyard, Red Rock Terrace, because the soil, that was what you call alluvial soil. Alluvial soil means it's been washed down over the millenium for eight million years and has been building up at the lower part of that hill over all these years, and so--

Hicke: Let me stop you here, because I want to talk about the different vineyards at some other point, but getting back to the cuttings.

Brounstein: Okay, yes, let's do that. You're so right, I do get off the track.

Hicke: Well, I'm just trying to keep it all in some right order.

Brounstein: You're right, you're doing your job, and very well. So anyway, so I used to have my own airplane, and I used to ski. Oh, I didn't put that down, did I? Well, anyway. So I would fly down to Mexico. These cuttings were flown in to Mexico City, and from there to Tijuana, and from Tijuana I had a confederate who would store the cuttings for me until I was able to bring them up. It took seven loads to do it in my airplane, because they would come in bundles like that, and I'd fly down with the confederate--this was before I married Boots, and my first wife had died about three or four years earlier.

She picked up the cuttings in Tijuana and would take a taxi down to Rosarita Beach, which had a little private airport, and I'd fly in there. Then at night, we'd get on, with nobody around, and we'd load up the cuttings into the ski slings in the back end of the fusillage of the airplane. Then

the next morning we'd fly out. We had to go through customs to get back into the United States, which was always through--not always, but once through another city, but primarily San Diego.

The first time I did it, I was so relieved that we made it after the inspection and that the inspector never did find that little compartment back of the fuselage. Anyway, so as we took off, I said, "Oh, boy, am I glad that's over, I thought we might have trouble," she says--this little gal I had was one of several friends I was dating--and she says, "This is so much fun, let's do marijuana next!" [laughter] So that was the last time I took her.

Hicke: How many vines did you bring in?

Brounstein: See, each cane has twelve to fifteen buds on it, and every one of those buds becomes a vine. So we had enough to plant our original acreage. Then any time we needed additional, like for that Lake Vineyard, we would just take off budwood of our own from those original.

Hicke: Now we need to go back--

Brounstein: Yes, what I had was, all I could bring in was--it was then 92 percent Cabernet and 8 percent Merlot. Then I didn't put in Cabernet Franc until about three or four years later. What I would do was whenever vines would die, if they were hit by tractors or things like that, then I would replace them with Cabernet Franc until I built up almost 4 percent of each vineyard, of each of the three vineyards, into Cabernet Franc. So I would have 88 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 8 percent Merlot, and then 4 percent Cabernet Franc.

Hicke: And you had them mixed in the vineyards?

Brounstein: Yes, because what happened is, when I first went to France and to these vineyards--I guess that's when I was on the trip to Italy; I don't remember exactly when--but anyway, I used to go to the head office and I'd say, "Where is your block of Merlot?" And they would say, "It's over there." "And where's your block of Petit Verdot?" "That's over there." But then when I went out to the fields, I'd say, in French, in my halting French, I'd say, "Where is the Merlot and where is the Petit Verdot?" And they'd say, "Par tout, par tout--it's everywhere, it's all blended in."

They weren't salesmen, they weren't trying to tell me about how fastidious they are, they're not giving me the

business, they had nothing to gain. So they would be telling me the truth, whereas the people in charge would bend things a little bit.

Hicke: So you planted your vineyards that way?

Brounstein: So I planted them all intermixed, everything intermixed.

Buying the Properties

Hicke: Okay, now, before we get too far, we haven't even bought the vineyard yet. So let's back up again and find out how you got up here.

Brounstein: Okay. Well, that's right. So anyway, I was working down at Ridge, I'd come up during the weekends, and I'd be all full of grape juice. When I took the rented car back and the gal would say to me, "Whatever happened to you? Where'd you get all that red stuff on you?" I'd say, "I've been picking grapes." She says, "Boy, there must be good money in picking grapes." If I would fly all the way up and fly back and rent a car, boy.

Hicke: You were working with Paul Draper then?[1]

Brounstein: Well, this was before Paul came on. David Bennion was in charge, and then there was Hugh Crane and Charlie Rosen, and of course Dick Foster. Dick was their vice president, and he's the one who got me into the Hollywood Wine and Food Society, and he's the one who used to, any time I'd get negative comments from anyone, I'd be able to cry on his shoulder. I'd have lunch with him, and I'd say, "Oh, jeez, this is going bad, or that's not going so well," and he'd pep me up. He was a very wonderful guy, and he still is. We saw him just about a couple of months ago, didn't we?

And so I talked to the farm advisor. I said, "I'm looking for a property. I'd love to have something like this in the hills."

Hicke: You talked to the farm advisor in Santa Cruz County?

---

[1] Paul Draper, History and Philosophy of Winemaking at Ridge, Vineyards, 1970s-1990s, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1994.

Brounstein: He was the farm advisor. So he says, "Listen, if you want good Cabernet, you've got to go to Napa." Isn't that something? The farm advisor for Santa Cruz?

Hicke: Yes, that is amazing.

Brounstein: So, I said, "Well, that's where I'm going." I went up to Napa and on the way, I talked to the farm advisor there, and he says, "Cabernet: you've got to go to north Napa, because that's where the heat is, and that's what Cabernet needs." And then I talked to André Tchelistcheff, and he told me, he says if it were up to him, all the land north of Rutherford would be planted in Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Sauvignon Blanc. That's what he told me. Any time I would meet André at any social engagement, he'd always introduce me as his competitor. [laughter]

Hicke: Because he was winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyard?

Brounstein: He was making that fantastic BV Private Reserve, and every time we had these meetings, Dick and I, we talked about BV Private Reserve, and wouldn't it be wonderful if someday we could make wine as good as BV Private Reserves? And that was our goal. Now things are so different.

Hicke: You certainly met that goal. Okay, so you were going to look around.

Brounstein: When I went up, I also dropped in to see Jack Davies, because he was close to the area where I was looking for my land. And Sterling [Vineyards] had just moved in up there, but they hadn't made the name for themselves yet.

##

Hicke: Fred McCrae you also talked to?

Boots B.: Yes. Stony Hill.

Brounstein: Fred McCrae, we talked to him. He says, "I'm going to take a look at your property," and I had just planted the year before, and he says, "That looked like a graveyard with milk cartons," because I was using milk cartons to keep off the deer and the rabbits.

Hicke: Tell me about finding this property.

Brounstein: It had just been listed by the local realtor in St. Helena. And I said, "I want property," he said, "Well, I've got

something nice in Calistoga." I said, "Yes, but I've been warned that I should buy in St. Helena. Calistoga is a remote area, and nobody has wine up in that area." There was nobody of any fame. [Louis M.] Martini was in St. Helena, Heitz [Wine Cellars] was St. Helena. That was the big place. But I went to Calistoga anyway. I went to the real estate salesman, and I told him that I wanted Cabernet, and pick me out a good spot.

He brought me up there. I was sitting on the back of a pickup truck to go up there the first time with the salesman. I was bleeding from being scratched by the manzanita branches. Anyway, when I got up there, where our fish pond is now, I looked down, I said, "I love this spot. I'm going to buy it." That's when my advisor said, "Don't do it. They want too much money." You know, $1400 an acre.

Hicke: And now you said it would sell for around $70,000 an acre.

Brounstein: Yes, $70,000, but that's if it were all developed and planted and having a reputation.

Developing the Vineyards

Hicke: So there was nothing here in the way of vineyards?

Brounstein: No. Well, there was an old prune orchard. I bought a tractor from Ridge, and I was using it back and forth to develop through--I had a little disc to cultivate the soil. We had a lot of manzanita growing up in that area.

Hicke: Where did you start? Down there in that flat area?

Brounstein: No, I started up at the high point, now called Volcanic Hill, I don't know why. I guess that light, fluffy soil looked like it was easy, and so I took that first. I did that, and soon my face was full of dust. I could hardly open my eyelids. It was real dusty, and you could hardly see your way when the tractor would upend all this soil that had been compacted over the years.

When I finished with that, I did Red Rock Terrace, and the soils were so different; I didn't get all that dust on me. Not that my face was clean, but--

Hicke: It wasn't fine dust like the--

Brounstein: No, not like volcanic--no. That ash that was so easily disked up. At that time, I was just sort of searching for someone to give me advice, and I went to Freemark Abbey, because they were making some very good wines at that time. We thought they were making some really good stuff. I tried to get a fellow named Brad Webb, because Brad was then considered to be second only to André Tchelistcheff, but he was out in the field. He wasn't a university man, he was a partner. Brad Webb was a partner with Freemark Abbey.

Brad since then has come down with Parkinson's. He's had it eight years longer than I, and he recently passed away.

But anyway, Brad says, "I can't do it, Al. But here's a guy who just came on, we just hired him from Gallo, and he can moonlight for you." In other words, I wouldn't need him very much, because I only had twenty acres, and I didn't think that was an awful lot in comparison to what everybody else had. They all had big acreage. And they were buying grapes. I would never buy a grape.

Hicke: So you were hunting for a winemaker.

Brounstein: Yes. So I got Jerry Luper to be my consultant. I said, "Jerry, I'd love to keep my vineyards separate. They seem so different. I think they'll each make a different wine." So he says, "Well, you have two years to find that out, because it has to sit two years in the barrel." After I'd--let's see, this was my first pick, or second pick, I think, something like that. Yes, I think it was my second. The first pick was when--

Boots B.: That was '71.

Brounstein: Yes.

Boots B.: So he's referring to our '72 vintage.

Brounstein: Yes, our '72, Jerry Luper now came on board, and he's the one who told me I could keep them separate. I was thrilled to know that, because some guys had been after me, and they said: "Al, it's your obligation as winemaker to blend those three vines, three different soils, and to make one great Cabernet out of it." He says--this one particular retailer in Sacramento--says, "Why should you, with one little dinky little vineyard, making less than 3,000 cases a year, expect me to devote three spaces of my valuable sales display for your one little Cabernet? You should blend those three." I said, "Yes, you're right, but I have to wait for one thing.

As soon as Domaine de Romanée-Conti blends their La Tâche and their Richebourg into Romanée-Conti, then I'll blend my three vineyards into one."

So that sort of stopped him. He didn't pursue it.

Terroir[2] of the Vineyards

Hicke: [laughs] Let me get from you a characterization of each of the vineyards.

Brounstein: All right. We feel that although I won't tell you where I got the vines, even though I'm going to tell you three names out of the five, of which two may or may not be included, I'm saying this--I'm not revealing any names--and the names that I'm talking about, I'm going to say just for characteristics of the wine, because what I tried to do, I'm always asked this question. Basically, the French made our industry in the first place. They got people interested in wine. So I had to relate my wine to one that they'd know, and the one that they know is a French product from a famous chateau, and so I would say, to answer your question, the Red Rock Terrace produces our first drinking wine. It's our most accessible, it's a relatively soft and easy to drink, it has a lower tannin feel, although it might have the same amount of tannin but a different aspect of the tannin. Anyway, we call that our Chateau Margaux.

But our Gravelly Meadow is full of gravel, very much like the soil of Graves, south of Bordeaux, and that is renowned for its Chateau Haut Brion.

But our big wine is the Chateau Latour of the three. That's the biggie. It's a big, gutsy wine that you should age to bring out its very best, and it's a waste of--it's sort of killing a baby to drink that wine young.

Hicke: Is this Volcanic Hill?

Brounstein: Volcanic Hill. That is a biggie, it has long life potential, and it's magnificent. For those who wait, it's well worth the wait. It's just a beautiful wine. However, there are three different tastes involved with those three different wines. The same grapes, the same weather basically, but they are separated by the creek and lagoon, and they make such

---

[2]Aspects of soil, water, and climate that affect grape-growing.

different wines that are so obviously different that people, primarily those in wine societies, will have three glasses brought out blind, and somebody can look at the color, sniff the bouquet, and taste it, and say, "This came from Red Rock Terrace, that from Volcanic Hill, and that from Gravelly Meadow," and they would be right.

That's the highest marks that you can get in wine tasting, and it's an exciting concept, and it is an obvious thing, actually, because we don't need just experts drinking our wine who can determine which one comes from what part of the land. What we want is what we get when we go to these big tastings, like Napa Valley Vintners has a routine where we will call on four different cities in four different days, and move from city to city. But what they do is they encourage large groups of basically fundraising groups that bring in people that have no idea what wine is all about, but they come because it's a means of raising funds for their typical charities.

So those people will come to our table, and they will taste the three wines, and they will invariably say, "I like this one better than I like that one."

Hicke: But I think--sorry to interrupt you, but I think what you're saying is that you attribute the differences then, since they're the same grapes in the same climate, to the different--

Brounstein: Soil.

Hicke: It has to be in the soil.

Brounstein: Soil. That, and there's another aspect to it, but first I'll talk about the soil. Because to me--

Hicke: And don't forget about Lake.

Brounstein: Yes, because that's a different situation.

Hicke: Okay, so the soil.

Brounstein: The soils are obviously different. I mean, did you recall when I was pointing at the lagoon and that little strip of volcanic soil? Did you remember how white and ashy it looked? And you saw other parts that were red. Anyway, the soils are obviously different, and people, when they come to one of our tastings, we try to situate ourself in an area where we can show off three of our wines at one time, because just one wine

doesn't mean much. It's just another wine. But three wines that they can taste differences, it's exciting even to a neophyte. I mean, people who have rarely tasted wine, and then they taste these wines and they say, "Gee, I like this one."

And frankly, the first one that they like generally has been Red Rock Terrace. That's our softest, easiest, most accessible.

Hicke: And that has red--

Brounstein: That has the red soil--here's why: if you were to go to the county records of Napa, the recorder of the Department of Conservation, you will find these soils listed under three headings. One would be called Boomer, the Boomer series. Those are soils that have a great deal of red soil in them. There's the Forward: the Forward is what we call Chateau Latour. That's Volcanic Hill. And then the Felta. Felta is the classification of a gravelly type of soil that loses its moisture very rapidly, and in the spring, you get fantastic drainage. That's another story.

Hicke: That's Gravelly Meadow.

Brounstein: That's Gravelly Meadow. I tell the people who came up to see us that this little creek divides the vineyard into three different soils. And I said, "We named this creek Diamond Creek because it's very important to us, because it does delineate those three soils so readily." Anyway, I was told by the man who sold me the property, a fellow named Bill Bonsall, who has the Spanish type home now occupied by the Von Strassers--anyway, Bill Bonsall told me that I would be able to pay my taxes with the diamonds that I got out of this creek.

Because you see, every year, the winter rains come at a ferocious pace (not like you saw that little dribble down the mountainside), but I mean it comes roaring down the spillway. It washes out rocks lining the creek and exposes the quartz crystals. People have been chunking out those crystals for years and they would be polished, mounted on a setting, and then they would go around and they'd say, "Look at my diamonds."

We never could get enough to pay taxes off of that, but we got a bonus because we had this little creek meandering through the vineyard and delineating these very easily discernible changes. So we named it Diamond Creek. It seemed

logical. It's been a good name for us. We're, I think, the very first of the Creeks. There's Carneros Creek and Dry Creek--

Hicke: You mean the first of the Creek wineries?

Brounstein: Yes, that's what I meant. Anyway, of course, now there's Jacob's Creek from Australia--that is their second biggest selling wine in Australia. But they had nothing to do with me nor I with them. I don't think they know about me any more than I know about them.

But in any event, I'm not about to fight them, because there's about forty different Creeks now. Matanzas Creek.

Hicke: So you named your winery after--

Brounstein: So I named it after these diamonds, and I'll show you those crystals.

Hicke: Oh, okay, you do have some.

Brounstein: Oh, yes. I'll show you in a little bit, when we stop for dinner.

Buying and Developing Lake Vineyard

Hicke: Is this where you want to tell me about the lake, the soil around the lake? Why did you decide to buy another property?

Brounstein: Well, here's what happened. I had this little twenty acres. It was eight Volcanic Hill, seven Red Rock Terrace, and five Gravelly. So that was my twenty acres.

Hicke: The property itself was forty acres when you bought it.

Brounstein: The property was seventy-nine acres, actually. No, actually, it was sixty-nine, but then I bought another five from my neighbor to get this Lake Vineyard. What happened is, I built this lake two years after I bought the land.

Hicke: You dammed up the creek?

Brounstein: I dammed up the creek. At that time, the reason for it had nothing to do with irrigating or conservation. What it had to do with was finance. What happened is, Ridge had offered some

of their property at the periphery of their vineyards for sale to people to build a home overlooking a vineyard. And so did another winery called--let's see, it's now Auberge du Soleil, but before that, let's see. I can't recall the name of the guy.

But Warren Winiarski worked for the original fellow who owned property farther north, and they wanted to sell off part of their land.

Hicke: The guy that owned the property where the Auberge is now?

Brounstein: Yes. Well, they were running full page ads in the Los Angeles paper and the San Francisco Chronicle, "Live on a vineyard." And they had roads made up and the whole bit. I hadn't built my lake yet, but I needed money. I never got that much out of the sale of my drug supply business. I just got enough to live on, but I had to work to support myself so that I didn't use up any of my cash that I needed for developing the vineyard. I went to work for distributors and other wineries and so on.

But anyway, getting back to this: so they ran an ad, and so did Ridge. They said, "Live in a house on a vineyard." So I thought, Well, if they're going to do it, I'll do it. But before I spent big money advertising it, I wanted to test it out. So I said, "Live on a lake on a vineyard." I hadn't built the lake, but I knew that the city of Calistoga had once shown an interest in that piece of land as a source of water for their little city, because they didn't have enough water, and they were always running out. They had a tough time raising funds with bonds and all that.

So I decided to run this ad. I got a great response. People came down, but they said, "Well, where's the lake?" So I said, "Well, I haven't built it yet, because I didn't want to spend the money until I felt that there would be some interest. Now that I see you guys are pouring in here, I'm going to go ahead and I'm going to build a little lake."

I did, and when it got done, it was so pretty, I said, "I can't sell seven lots around here." I borrowed $50,000 from my insurance company--let's see, which one?--Equitable. Anyway, I went down to the county and I made out a Planned Development--they called it a PD, Planned Development--where I could sell seven lots around this lake.

I said, "This is too beautiful. Why should I sell it to these ungrateful people and have them messing up my beautiful

property?" I told the insurance man, I said, "You know, I had a year on this permit that I got from the county to put up a PD, and the year is up, and I do not want to develop that land. And I don't have the cash to pay you back." He says, "Don't worry about it. We're an insurance company. We'll give you thirty years to pay us back." Well, I paid him back in about four years, but that was luck. I mean, I had reached that point.

Anyway, so now I had this beautiful little piece of land, and I didn't have to have hippies come down, because they'd been coming down when it was owned by the previous owner, and they'd be throwing their beer cans all around and whatever. Now I couldn't have that. So to get the road and that little piece of one-acre lake, I had to spend--was it $10,000?

Hicke: You had to build the road up here?

Brounstein: Well, the road was already there, but I'd started a fire--I'll tell you about that. I've skipped that. Remind me, will you?

Hicke: Okay, we can do that tomorrow.

Boots B.: Did you do the flood?

Hicke: No, we haven't done the flood either.

Brounstein: Don't take my punch lines, Boots!

Hicke: We'll leave that part.

Brounstein: She's killing my punch lines.

Hicke: I still don't know what kind of soil is on the Lake Vineyard.

Microclimates

Brounstein: Okay. Well, see, it wasn't really important, because I wasn't talking soil. I was talking about something else: microclimates. I'm going to talk about that in a little while. But microclimates, I thought, and I'll tell you all about that. Jerry asked them for the printout of the microclimates that we had at the French Laundry.

Boots B.: Do you want it now?

Brounstein: Yes, I do. So I won't forget it.

Hicke: Yes, and we can include that.

Brounstein: I borrowed that money to build the dam, and then after I built the dam I developed that vineyard, because it was eight by twelves.

Hicke: Spacing?

##

Brounstein: If I had twelve-foot rows, it would be easy to get the tractors up and down, but it would look like heck. All you'd see would be all that dirt. After you cultivate, you'd see just dirt, dirt, dirt, because in that little space, if they were twelve feet apart, you'd only have about two or three rows of vines. If you were out on the lake, paddling around on the lake, and you looked back, it would look awful. You'd see just a bunch of dirt. So I planted eight-by-eights.

Hicke: You planted your vineyards for the scenic aspect of it?

Brounstein: Yes. I said, "The heck with the soil, I want the beauty."

Hicke: So it's eight by eight.

Brounstein: So I planted eight by eight, and I was one of the first to plant so close.

We planted St. George rootstock, which we had in all other areas of the vineyard.

Hicke: Yes, we didn't get into the rootstock.

Brounstein: That's true. But anyway, the reason we didn't is it wasn't important. It was important; if it weren't for the right rootstock, I'd be out of business. So now I had control. I didn't have hippies coming down. I could widen that road that did lead into that little Lake Vineyard. I paid a lot of attention to that. [tape interruption]

Hicke: So you've got the Lake Vineyard.

Brounstein: Yes. Now, if you recall, I was pointing out to you on our little drive over, I said, "Those are Sequoia *sempervirons* redwoods, coast redwoods." I said, "The reason that they have survived is that they get these cool afternoon breezes from the ocean twenty miles away, and it cools off this vineyard

first. Because it does, the wine does not lose its acid, because heat, heat, heat knocks out acid--"

Hicke: The grapes?

Brounstein: In the grapes. And without the acid--that's your flavor. That's where you get the basic flavor.

So now we were getting cool breezes.

Hicke: Do those breezes hit the other vineyards?

Brounstein: Yes, but those are now being warmed up on the other side. Here's the valley--let's see. [demonstrating] Here's the valley, here is the ocean, here's the Russian River. It curves off that way before it comes up to our redwoods. But now this continues on, and hits Gravelly Meadow before it hits the other two vineyards. But beyond that is the town of Calistoga. This is our hot spot. Calistoga is the hot spot of Napa Valley.

Hicke: Is it? I didn't know that.

Brounstein: Well, you see, the temperatures are five to ten degrees higher here in Calistoga than they are in Napa. It's all because of the influence of the San Pablo Bay, which the air circulates around, and it comes twenty-five miles up the Valley, and it gets hotter and hotter as it comes to this little confluence where it all narrows down into a little neck-like area of Calistoga and north. So now we have a cool vineyard, and that's wonderful, depending. By that I mean, here we are devoted to our three vineyards, the soil of our three vineyards. But some years, it's a hot year, and so our three vineyards are picked relatively early, and there is the little Lake Vineyard all by itself, and because it's been cool all this time, the grapes have a long hang time. By that I mean, they're hanging around, and we never, ever pick them until at least a month has elapsed from the time we pick the first part of Volcanic Hill or the first part of Red Rock Terrace. [Boots hands over papers] Yes, these are the soils, but these are microclimates, we'll talk about that in just a short time.

Hicke: Okay. Thanks, Boots.

Brounstein: So anyway, then on a cool year, with the additional hang time, these grapes have had more time to get more complex, to get more intense, and to make a true different wine with the same grapes, the same roots, the same viticulture, everything the same, but because it's had that extended time on the vines,

it's made a better wine--I mean it tastes better. It's obvious from the very first. Boots and I will taste that wine in December after it's first made, before we have the tasting panel--I'll tell you about the tasting panel. That's Richard Peterson, who was André Tchelistcheff's right-hand man when they were working together at BV. So I've got Richard Peterson, who also runs what's called the Trouble Corner for the Wines and Vines magazine, if you've ever heard of that.

Hicke: Oh, yes.

Brounstein: Phil Hiaring, Jr., is now in charge of that. But anyway, besides Dick Peterson of BV fame and Wines and Vines fame, we have Heidi Peterson, his daughter, who has made a great name for herself already. She's been very influential in my decision-making on whether or not to have a special microclimate. And also we have a fellow named Leo McCloskey. Leo was very involved with Ridge Vineyards when I was up there in the early to mid-sixties. And this is before Paul Draper ever came on the scene. He was not their enologist, he was a chemist. He and Dave Bennion were best of friends. Unfortunately, David got killed in a head-on crash on the Golden Gate Bridge, on the onramp. But this was after they had sold the business. Ridge sold it to a Japanese consortium, I don't know about that at all.

Hicke: Yes. Paul Draper talked about that.

Brounstein: Yes? Paul's a great guy. Now the Lake--but that was not unusual, because if you look at this list, here are all the wines we made in thirty years. We made ninety-four wines, ninety-four different wines. These were all the Gravelly Meadows. These were all Red Rock Terrace; these were all Volcanic Hill. But then, we would blend; in certain years, we did a three-vineyard blend.

Remember I had this nay-sayer who told me that I should make all three into one?

Hicke: Was that the distributor in Sacramento?

Brounstein: Yes. How did you know?

Hicke: Oh, he's well known.

Brounstein: But he was not the only one. I had others who said the same thing.

Hicke: Tell me about the three-vineyard blend.

Brounstein: Three-vineyard blend--this is when we would have not our regular crop but what we call second crop. Second crop are little clusters that the vine puts out when it feels that you have deprived it of the right to have all--it would like to have more than twelve budded canes, twelve--yes, twelve areas of new growth with big clusters. What you do is, if you put out fifteen buds, or if it makes its own buds, which it does if you don't leave enough buds there, it pops out sometimes twenty canes. So you've got these little second growth buds out there, and the berries are full of acid, because whereas your regular crop is nice and purple, beautiful, you've got this second crop that has a lot of green berries still on it. If you can get additional picking time, by that I mean if you don't get rain just after you pick your main crop--that normally is what happens--

Hicke: Those will then ripen.

Brounstein: Yes. They're all ripe, they're great, and we want good wine, so we pick the grapes just as they're fully ripe. That's our first crop. But we don't say first--well, we did say first crop and second crop. Didn't we? Here, first pick and second pick?

Hicke: Oh, yes.

Brounstein: Now, what we did here in 1977--the Red Rock--here's what. We're in a little canyon. The upper part ripens--heat rises, and you need heat. That's why Calistoga is so good for heat, but it's too good, and that's why we're not down on the Valley floor in Calistoga, because we're up 800 feet above the Valley. We're at the 880-foot, I think it is, or down to 660. But we're in this little canyon, and the upper part ripens before the lower part.

So we will start picking the upper part of Volcanic and the upper part of Red Rock, and then we will wait three or four days after that ripens. So although we have three soils and one wine, Cabernet, we will get as many as twenty-five lots out of that little twenty-acre vineyard.

Hicke: That you keep separate?

Brounstein: Everything is kept separate. We will get five picks out of Volcanic Hill, four picks out of Red Rock, three picks out of Gravelly, because these are now diminishing in size, and then we'll get one or two out of Lake. It depends. You see, we're very fastidious about every drop of wine that goes into our barrels, and the grapes have all got to be ripe. If they're

not, we will sell off barrels of wine that don't make it, if that ever happens on some years.

Up to now, we've had microclimates, we've had special selection, we had first pick, we had--let's see--V.H. '79.

Hicke: Red Rock, second pick.

Brounstein: Second pick. For instance, what we used to do with our losers, or those who didn't make it, now we would label them "second pick," or if they were real good, we'd call them first pick or special selection. But if they weren't up to our standard, we would sell off the wine in a barrel. These would go to people in other wineries, not in Napa, who promised us they would never, ever say that these grapes came from Diamond Mountain or Diamond anything, and they would never imply that they got their grapes from us, because these are rejects from us, but they are wonderful wine for them. Because they never had such good wine, but we have certain standards.

Now, that's where Leo comes in, Leo McCloskey. He has this place called Enologix. I knew him way back when, when he was a chemist, and now he's taken his chemistry to the nth degree, and we are very, very aware of what he is doing, because he goes beyond most labs. We have ETS, Enologic Technical Services, and that's our principal laboratory beside our own lab, run by Phil Steinschriber, who is a very, very, super capable guy, and he knows how to do all the tests, and he knows what to expect if there is any deviation. But we have this panel that comes in, Dick and Heidi and Leo and sometimes a visiting winery person just to get an idea what they're thinking.

Anyway, I am leading up to what I think is going to be the most important step that I can make in my career, because I have been talking about soils for almost thirty years, and now I am going to switch to microclimates, because we could have said, Let's plant Zinfandel on Red Rock Terrace, and let's plant Sauvignon Blanc on Gravelly Meadow. We could have just as easily done that and not known that there was any difference, because the soils would have had different varieties. Because we have everything the same, the same cuttings, the same viticulture, the same enology, difference only in soil--and now I'm going to bring up the other difference. But that in itself has been intriguing, that has helped us build a very loyal following.

My customer following has helped us through thick and thin. Those people out there buy my wine, my customers, they feel a part of my operation, they love what I'm doing, and they are

buying my wine year in and year out. It's all because they think that this is special and they love being associated with it.

These people who bought the wine recently now see all these wonderful writeups by Jim Laube. Don't you think that they envy those people who bought my wine way in the beginning?

Hicke: Oh, yes.

Brounstein: And they now say, "Look at this, I paid seven-fifty for this bottle." And it's now $150.

Hicke: What did you sell your wine for the first time?

Brounstein: Well, in the beginning, it was seven-fifty a bottle, five dollars wholesale.

Boots B.: We thought that was a lot of money! We were just hoping people would buy it.

Brounstein: Yes. Well, my dad said--I don't know if you've heard that story--but my dad said, "Why do you want to go in the wine business to make two-dollar-a-bottle wine?" I said, "I don't want to make two-dollar-a-bottle wine. I want to make three-fifty a bottle." [laughter] Because BV Private Reserve was on the market for five dollars a bottle.

Boots B.: BV.

Brounstein: And my uncle said, "Why do you want to get in the wine business? Everybody's getting out of the wine business." These were tough times. They were all getting out of wine, because wine had a bad reputation. That wine was for "dehorns". That it was for "winos". That was a big term that they used. And everybody's advising me not to get into the business.

Hicke: It's a good thing you're not a wimp.

Boots B.: No, he's not.

Brounstein: It's amazing.

Boots B.: He's his own man.

Brounstein: That I should come from there to being interviewed by you. I mean, that is fantastic.

Diamond Creek Crystals

[Interview 2: December 22, 1998] ##

Brounstein: These are the quartz crystals, [pointing] see, and they polish them, and they mount them on settings, and they say, "Look at my diamonds."

Hicke: And those all came out of Diamond Creek?

Brounstein: Right out of the rocks lining the creek. These are quartz crystals.

Hicke: Oh, they're beautiful.

Brounstein: These are obsidian Indian arrowheads. They also came from our property. Isn't that something?

Hicke: Amazing.

Brounstein: Some of those guys, they sit around the creek, or around the fireplace, watching television and making arrowheads. Well, maybe not watching television.

Marketing Microclimates

Hicke: Well, what we thought we'd do is start with microclimates again this morning.

Brounstein: Oh, yes, let's. Because you see, the thrust of my marketing for the next fifteen years is microclimates.

Hicke: Can you explain all that?

Brounstein: I can demonstrate it here probably better than any other winery or vineyard, the importance of microclimates, because although we're just twenty acres, a very small winery, we are in this canyon in the mountains, and the upper portions of the canyon get the heat that rises--hot air rises. For instance, that's how hot-air balloons make it. So the upper portions of the vineyard will ripen as much as a month before the lower portions of that same vineyard, primarily Volcanic Hill and Red Rock Terrace. Gravelly Meadow does not have the steep slopes that are attributable to the other two vineyards.

However, in addition to height differentiations, there is the length differentiation. By that I mean the cooler air from the ocean strikes the Lake Vineyard first. We are located twenty miles, approximately, from the ocean, very much like Bordeaux is from the Atlantic.

Hicke: Well, Bordeaux is on a river, but the Medoc, where most of the wine is grown is a peninsula.

Brounstein: Anyway, it gets the basic cool ocean air every afternoon, just as we do. So our vineyard closest to the ocean is the Lake. It is cooled off first. As a matter of fact, you can almost set your clock by the fact that about one o'clock every afternoon, the cool ocean air comes in and cools off the vineyard, and that maintains the acid in the wine, or in the grapes first, and acid is where you get your flavor. So we have a very flavorful wine, and it shows up in that it has the extra hang time.

See, the fact that it's so cool means it takes another month for it to ripen over the beginning of the ripening of Volcanic Hill, let's say, or Red Rock Terrace. So the Lake has a lag time of a whole month, and in that time, grapes are hanging on the vine, and it's taking up all this energy from the sun, if we don't have a heavy rain after the initial pick. The three main vineyards, the Volcanic Hill, Red Rock, and Gravelly Meadow, those are generally picked before the rains.

But because of the extra-long hang time, many times the Lake Vineyard is caught in the rain, and it may not produce an outstanding wine.

Hicke: That's why you don't make a Lake Vineyard every year. Yes, I see.

Brounstein: And generally, depending upon the year and the amount of cool weather, we either don't make a Lake or, if we make one, because it does meet our standards, then we can blend it with the other vineyards. But if it's below our standard, then we sell it off to other wineries not in Napa Valley.

Hicke: And this tasting panel determines those decisions?

Brounstein: Well, the tasting panel. Well, we know almost right from the start, Boots and I, when we taste the wine. We say, "Gee, this is a great wine." And it does stand out. That's my point; we're not professionals. By that, I mean we don't have professional training in enology. I've taken a lot of courses at Davis on winemaking and so forth, but not anywhere near the

comprehensive courses that are taken by enologists and the pros, and despite the fact we are not professionals, we can make a judgment, and sometimes we're right.

In other words, the wine is so outstanding that even we, as so-called--not necessarily amateurs, but quasi-amateurs or quasi-professionals--we can tell the difference almost right from the very start.

Hicke: How did you actually develop your palate?

Brounstein: Well, I wouldn't know whether we developed it as such. Would you feel that you did a conscious--

Boots B.: I would say to develop a palate, it's just tasting lots of wines.

Hicke: But you have to have a really good memory, too, don't you?

Boots B.: It is necessary to have a good memory, but I think the most important thing for people that want to develop a palate, and there's no right or wrong about the wines that an individual likes, and I always tell people when they ask me that question, I always tell them, "Drink a lot of different wines, create your own palate. Your palate will then develop and become sophisticated, and you will know the good wines from the wines that are not as good to your palate. It will just develop that way." And then you read a lot, also. You take courses. And you learn what to look for.

Brounstein: Boots belongs to a tasting society, she was one of the initiates of it, and she's probably the longest lasting member.

Boots B.: Well, there's a few of the original members. We're very serious, and we meet once a month, and we taste wines from all over the world.

Brounstein: And they invite experts to give discussions on it as well. So they're very dedicated.

Hicke: Does this group have a name?

Boots B.: [laughs] Yes. Women's Wine Technical Group. It's a group of us here in Napa Valley. We meet at each other's homes once a month.

Brounstein: They started other groups. And then there are other groups that were started even before their initiation in it. Was it Barbara--

Boots B.: It was Barbara Zeponi who actually started it.

Brounstein: She put it together, she started it. But before that, there was Jamie Davies, and others.

Boots B.: There's a lot of wine tasting groups within the Valley. I was never involved in Jamie's group or she was never involved in my group. But there are a lot of tasting groups for men, and for women, all over the Valley. So we're constantly tasting and evaluating.

Brounstein: And again, our winemaker is a very qualified man. He not only tasted wines many years ago as a student at Fresno College, but he worked for other wineries, and he has a very sharp talent. We trust his views to a great degree.

Hicke: Is this Jerry Luper?

Brounstein: Jerry Luper was a consultant.

Hicke: And your present winemaker--

Brounstein: Phil Steinschriber is an employee. He graduated, frankly, with higher honors than Jerry Luper in this respect: he went on to be a master of the wine, whereas Jerry was a super good man--but he graduated with a bachelor's degree. They both were very fine tasters.

Hicke: We got kind of far afield from the microclimates. Is there more to say about that?

Brounstein: Yes. Well, because here's what we do. We will have as many as five picks of Volcanic Hill. Did we discuss this?

Hicke: Yes.

Brounstein: We will have as many as twenty-five different wines out of one little twenty-one-acre vineyard.

Hicke: And each one of these is a different microclimate, is what you're saying?

Brounstein: Yes. And by that, I mean they were picked at different times. We are aiming not just for sugar development. In other words, in the old days, everyone said--now, Maynard Amerine, for

instance, the terrific professor of enology, used to say, "If a grape is 22 degrees sugar, it's ripe." But since then, we found that this is not adequate for the customer that we're looking for. Our customer demands higher standards than that. We go to 23 degrees, sometimes even higher. Or sometimes a little bit lower. But a lot has to do with what we consider to be a mature grape.

Unlike Zinfandel, which in a cluster has grapes of high sugars, grapes of low sugars, grapes of deep intensity, and grapes that are relatively rose almost in color, Cabernet is very docile, dependable, and one that you can trust, because in a cluster of about 120 berries, there's such evenness of ripening that unless you make a big mistake in picking your sample, it's very dependable. Is that waterfall on?

Hicke: Yes, it is. I was just enjoying it.

Brounstein: Well, that was my first waterfall. You saw my eighth waterfall, and we're working now on my ninth. So I'm a waterfall freak. But I do like water. We have this creek, this is Teal Creek, in front of our house, and we have Diamond Creek running through the middle of our property. Then we have the lake that I built, that dam, and we've got a lagoon that is leaking right now. We're about to fix that. And then we have the concert pond, and now eight and a half waterfalls.

Hicke: Going on nine. Okay, so you were just telling me about the Cabernet grapes.

Brounstein: Yes, now Cabernet is a very dependable grape. Moreover, unlike Pinot Noir, which has about 150 different clones, Cabernet has--generally there are about fifteen or twenty clones, different aspects of the same variety, and we are so happy that we got two of the clones that had been successful for over 150 years. We feel that that is instrumental in the success of our operation.

But beside the clones, the soil is next in importance, and then microclimate seemingly comes last, because nobody's been able to interpret it or to separate it or to delineate its different influences on the wine, as our little vineyard demonstrates. It's such a unique little spot on Earth that we are willing to concede that it's our vineyard, and not myself, that's made us outstanding. Because the vineyard has the soil separation, and it has the microclimate separation. They're both quite obvious. Well, they are to me.

Hicke: Well, yes, you have a lot to do with it, obviously. How do you decide, when you're going up or down the hill, which row you stop at?

Brounstein: Well, that's the point. It almost tells you. The vineyard tells you, "Hold off." It says, "Look, you picked the best, those first three rows. Take it easy now. Don't pick--don't get greedy, don't try to get it over with, don't push. Just take your time," and then the next lower level will ripen up as this one did, and then the next and the next. Sometimes we'll only get three picks out of Volcanic Hill, or sometimes only two picks out of Red Rock Terrace. But we do get as many as twenty-five to a great extent that we are tasting and testing and blending and separating.

We're putting in an awful lot of effort with our little tasting panel and ourselves, and trying to see what will satisfy our customer. We feel we know what they're looking for, that our customer wants something special. They're special in that they too are devoting their hours of hobby, because it is a hobby, it's more than a hobby. It's an interesting subject in itself, and it becomes even more interesting during a great meal. Because that's when they make the determination that this has been a magnificent dinner, because it's not only great food, but it's been just unusually good wine.

Rootstocks

Hicke: How did you determine which rootstocks? You said you planted the St. George.

Brounstein: I was lucky in that respect. There were basically two rootstocks being offered at the time that I brought in my cuttings. One of them was the AXR1, which of course became a disaster. But the other is St. George.

Hicke: But practically everybody chose AXR1.

Brounstein: Well, they did, but I didn't, because--[pause]

Hicke: Yes, why?

Brounstein: Well, first of all, I couldn't get AXR1. The demand was very, very heavy, and I would have had to wait two years. So that sort of solved that. But more than that, my interest

primarily was St. George because I knew that it was a drought-resistant rootstock. I was going to be planting in the mountains. I always wanted mountain property. That's why I spent so much time at Ridge, and that's why I would go to David Bruce. All these guys up in the mountains.

Dry Farming

Hicke: That brings up another question: what about irrigation? Do you have to irrigate?

Brounstein: We now irrigate, but in the beginning I had to use a watering truck to go from vine to vine. That was very difficult. But then, as we prospered, any time we had new plantings, we would use drip. And if you were to go to our Petit Verdot vineyard now, and also if you look at that at the bottom of Red Rock Terrace, you'll see that there's drip lines on all these new babies, because they do need water. But once the vine produces grapes, after three years, the drip lines go. We dry farm. We feel dry farming is a very important aspect of good winemaking, because what it does is, instead of having, a nice, big, juicy berry full of water, we have these tiny berries, and there's a high relationship of skin to juice. In other words, when you press a grape, you'll see very little juice coming out, and there's a heavy skin. It's a thick, heavy skin. That's where you get the color.

Winemaking and the Winery

Brounstein: First of all, if you take the grapes off the skins right away and press them, that's where you get White Zinfandel. Zinfandel is a red variety, and yet it's almost white if you don't give it a chance to absorb for the alcohol that develops. The alcohol penetrates the skins and takes off all the color, and within five days generally you've got as much color as you need from the skin.

But beside the color, you get the tannin. Tannin is a preservative. They tan shoes. You know, they use tannic acid to tan shoes, leather. Leather lasts a lifetime, and so does wine, if it has the proper amount of tannin. Now, tannin acts as a flocculant as well, and it precipitates particulates in the wine, so that it acts as its own fining agent. If you

have a generous amount of tannin, not only do you get the long life of the grape, but you clarify your wine at the same time. Because it settles out within about four or five days, you've settled out most of the heavy particulates in the wine coming out of the press. You know, as the wine comes out of the press, it goes into settling tanks for four or five days.

In a short time, it settles out. The major portion of these particles that just came from the press. Pressing sometimes doesn't destroy, doesn't grind it up either, but it does leave little particles, sometimes seeds, sometimes skins, and they are all settled out in the settling tank process. Then they go into new wood and used wood. By that, I mean we buy new wood every year--French Nevers oak, which is what we consider to be the best of all the various provinces of France for Cabernet. There's Limousin and various other names of French oaks. Of course, wood comes from Russia, from Bulgaria, and of course, there's American wood, but we like the French Nevers oak. That is the perfect wood for our style of wine.

So what happens is, the wood transmits a vanilla-like flavor to the wine. It gives it a real nice flavor. However, if you use another kind of an oak, it gives an odd flavor to the wine. But another thing is, if you leave the wine on the wood too long, then it has an oaky flavor to the wine. So all these factors have to be taken into consideration.

We go from new to used wood within a month, we transfer--or rack, is the expression--we rack wine from the new barrels to previous year's wood so that it doesn't take up too much oak. We get all the vanilla we want out of it, and it adds a softer feel to the wine.

Hicke: You've practically gone right down my outline on winemaking, but let me ask you a couple of things. Did you decide right away that you were going to make wine, you weren't just going to have a vineyard?

Brounstein: No, no. See, what happened is, originally I was going to just have a vineyard. I just wanted the quiet, easy life of a vineyard owner, because it's so simple to sell the grapes to somebody and let him worry about making wine. Let him worry about selling it. But then I talked to my friend Dick Foster. He said, "Look, Al, as long as you're going to have grapes, you might as well make wine." I said, "What do I know about making wine?" He said, "You'll learn." And I did. Apparently I did.

Hicke: Yes, apparently so!

Brounstein: Because of the results.

Hicke: Then you had to build the winery.

Brounstein: No, I didn't have to build the winery. I used my neighbor's caves. Right up the hill from us was a fellow named Gene Hill. He owned caves that had been used in the early 1900s, because when the Chinese came to--let's see, the '49 gold rush, if they found gold, they were killed by the natives, because they were an easy target.

Hicke: You don't mean the Indians, you mean--

Brounstein: No, I was thinking about--

Hicke: The whites. Gold miners.

Brounstein: There were so many people, millions--seemingly millions--came for the gold rush. There wasn't that kind of gold around, and most of them either died from the cold, or they went home and gave up. But the Chinese, they went into other occupations, and one of them was laying stones where they would build caves and then line it with rocks, or else they would build wineries, and people would have above-ground wineries, and there are quite a few of those still around, I think. Joe Heitz has one, doesn't he?

Boots B.: A cave?

Brounstein: No, an upright winery made out of stone.

Boots B.: I'm not sure.

Brounstein: I thought he did.

Hicke: I'm going to turn the tape over.

##

Brounstein: The Chinese were very influential in the development of the wine business, because they would accept low wages, and those who survived the gold rush would go into winemaking for the Americans, and they'd also do restaurants. But they were very ingenious and very qualified laborers. However, they've been replaced by the Mexicans now.

Hicke: Did they build these caves up here that you used?

Brounstein: Yes, they did, but there was an earthquake in 1906, I think it was, and the caves caved in. They deposited huge piles of soil in the caves, but we stayed at the very exit of the cave. We didn't go back too deep. One time, a BATF inspector came by, as they usually do, to inspect what's going on. We were a bona fide winery approved by the BATF, but one of the inspectors saw that caved-in cave, he says, "I'm not coming back." [laughter] He says, "It would be my luck to be here just when it caves in again."

However, when we moved out, Sterling Vineyards moved in, and I think they redid the caves.

Hicke: These caves?

Brounstein: I think so. Did they?

Boots B.: I've never been up there since we left.

Brounstein: No, I haven't either, since we left. But I think I heard that they did redo those, that area.

Boots B.: It's very possible.

Hicke: But anyway, first you used the caves for your winery.

Brounstein: Yes.

Boots B.: Well, to clarify it, it was only a place where we stored our barrels.

Brounstein: We made our wine out in the vineyards, just as we did until recently.

Boots B.: So it was never a winery for us, it was just a storage area for our barrels.

Brounstein: Yes, that's correct.

Boots B.: We always, until we built the structure, we always made wine ourselves.

Brounstein: On our own property. We never, ever made wine anyplace else. What we did do, we once crushed over at Cuvaison [Winery] when Tom Cottrell was in charge. Here's what we did: our first crop was not '72, as is commonly known. It was '71. In '71 our first few grapes had come out, and it was a very young vineyard. It was only three years old, and it takes four

years, generally, before the vines make enough grapes that you can crush into a wine.

We did have some grapes, and so we went over to Cuvaison. I'd asked Tom Cottrell, who was the manager, if I could use his crusher to crush my grapes. He says, "Of course." Everyone was very helpful to everyone else in those days.

So Boots and I and her aunt, we had some brand-new garbage cans, plastic garbage cans, that we lined with plastic, and we put all of our grapes into those plastic garbage cans, because Ridge had been using them to make samples of wine when they wanted just little batches. That's what they were using, and then they would punch it down. So that's what we used.

Hicke: That's what you did, you punched it down yourself?

Brounstein: Yes, but before we went to the punch-down, we had to crush the grapes. So we asked Tom if we could use his crusher, and he says, "Go right ahead." We did, and we crushed those buckets of wine. He had this crusher outdoors, and then it led, with a sack-like contraption, down to the fermenters.

So we crushed our first batch, and we went to Tom, we said, "Tom, we're waiting for our grapes to come out of that tube. How are we going to get them out of the tube?" He says, "Well, when you bring your next batch, we'll just run it through, and it will force the grapes through the tube into the fermenter." So I said, "What grapes?" That was all the grapes we had, three buckets of grapes, and it wasn't enough to fill the tube. [laughter] Or just barely enough to fill the tube.

So then we had to hold the tube up and let gravity take it into the fermenter. And that made about fifteen cases of wine. That was our very first wine.

Hicke: Did you already have the oak barrels and everything?

Brounstein: Yes, I think I had eight barrels or something like that that I had bought. I didn't know how much I was going to use, but I think as many as eight barrels.

So anyway, so I had fifteen cases of wine. But in the meantime, the next year, it came time to make wine again. Now, this time, we had quite a bit of wine. Not a lot, but in comparison quite a bit. When you put wine in barrels, you have to top it off from time to time, because the wine would

permeate the wood, and you would have what they call ullage, where the wine would evaporate in the barrel, and it would allow, if it wasn't watched, it would allow air to be sucked past the bung into the wine. So you had to top it off quite frequently.

Well, so I told my worker, Sergio Canchola--

Hicke: He was with you from the start?

Brounstein: Yes. I told him, "You've got to take some of those bottles of wine that we have--" we had these fifteen cases of wine sitting up in the winery, because we had no other storage space at that time. I says, "Just take a bottle of wine and fill up these barrels on a regular basis, every couple of weeks. Check it out, until the point where it doesn't divest itself of this wine."

So one day, now this is after two years had gone by, we had sort of hidden these fifteen cases of wine back in a remote area. I told Sergio, "Sergio, I'd like a few cases of wine. I want to give one case to a friend of mine," who had helped finance my project. He had lent me some money. I wanted to thank him. So I said, "You're going to have to just top it up one more time." He says, "But there's no more wine." He had used up all fifteen but one--the first fourteen cases were used up topping the next vintage.

I don't remember how many cases, probably 150 cases or 200 possibly. So I had one case of wine which I had given that to my friend--yes. Then when I said, "Jeez, I'd like to have half of it back, I'll pay you very well for it," he says, "I'm not going to sell you that wine. It's a rare wine." It had a terrible label on it. The label we had designed was just awful.

But I never did see any of the twelve bottles we gave my friend, because his wife's son drank up most of the wine. It was so sad.

Designing the Label

Brounstein: Now, talking about the label: now, my label. I didn't want to have any ordinary label. I didn't want to have a label that copied the French. A friend of mine was married to an artist, and I thought she was very unusual in her approach to drawing

and to artistry, so I said, "I'd like to have a woman's point of view on the label anyway." He said, "Okay, I'll let her do the design, but I will do the type." So I said, "Okay." Now, the type, the way I wanted the type, if you look at my label--

Hicke: I haven't seen your label.

Brounstein: Well, here it is right here, if you want. [Boots shows label]

Boots B.: I just wanted you to see it. Also I wanted to tell you, my nephew is an artist, and it just bugs him every time he looks at it, because you see the M is off.

Hicke: Oh, I would never have seen that.

Boots B.: I know, but his eye--

Brounstein: You see this type here?

Hicke: Yes.

Brounstein: So I told him, "You know what type I want? You know, we're out West. We're in the wild and woolly West. I'd like something that would demonstrate that we are from California and that we represent the West. I'd like you to use the type that they use in these posters, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive, Dead-Eye Dick'." And that's the type he gave me. But I asked her, I said, "I want you to depict the creek running through there," and [pointing to label] here is the terraces, and here's Volcanic Hill, and these are the mountains that we're in.

So I showed the design to my printer. The printer said, "That's the worst label I've ever seen." I says, "Well, I like it," and I wanted this in lower case--

Hicke: I was going to ask about that: why it's diamond creek--

Brounstein: I wanted that in lower case, [diamond creek] so I have something that's really unique, because nobody will copy it. I'll tell you, that stands out so easily in a shelf with all these fancy labels, and this thing just hits you, that, boy, it's weird. But it isn't that it was weird, it was her interpretation of what I wanted to show. I wanted to show the creek, I wanted to show the terraces, and I wanted to show the Volcanic Hill, and to see the separation of one vineyard from the next, and to see the mountains. I thought she did a great job.

Hicke: I think so, too.

Brounstein: I know that people pay $10,000 for a label design, but mine cost me $250. [laughter] I've used it ever since. Isn't that something?

Fire and Flood

Hicke: That's a great story. Before we get too far, let's get the fire and flood stories.

Brounstein: Oh, yes, okay. Here's what: my friends at Ridge had decided to raise funds, because they needed money, as everybody did investing in this business. We didn't realize there's such a long wait time before you see money, before any money comes in. Because it takes four years to raise the vines, and then two years in the barrel, six years go by without dime #1 coming in, and all that money is going out. So you just have to have a lot of money, which I didn't have. I had money from the sale of my other business, but it wasn't enough to keep us in food and lodging, as well as to keep the vineyards going, especially because I had to buy the land and pay for that, and then I had to clear it. There was a lot of clearing that had to be done.

Then I had to develop it, and I had bought this tractor from Ridge Vineyards. They thought they were doing me a big favor by selling me this tractor with a disc. In no time, that tractor was giving us nothing but trouble. I took it in to the repairman and he says, "If this was my tractor, I would dig a deep hole and bury it." [laughter] So I had to get another used tractor, which was a lot better than the one I had from Ridge. But I'm not complaining, don't get me wrong. I could have said no, but I didn't.

But anyway, they were wonderful by letting me come up there and see what they were doing.

Hicke: So you got a new used tractor.

Brounstein: So now, I went to this insurance guy--the guy who lent me money originally on my land--and I said I wanted to put up a planned development around the lake. I says, "I'm going to put in a lake and sell homesites around the lake." I was going to run an ad in the Wall Street Journal and it was going

to cost me thirty-five dollars, and I'd find out whether or not, if I put in a lake, whether people would come to buy.

Hicke: We got some of that story yesterday, about how you eventually didn't develop.

Brounstein: No, I didn't develop the lake, but I ran the ad, and I got a lot of people who came by. So now I knew that if I put in a lake, I'd be able to sell it. So to build the lake, I first had to clear all the trees that were in this little canyon, at that lake area. You saw that waterfall, and you saw how it was in a canyon?

Hicke: Yes, with steep sides.

Brounstein: We dammed up the canyon, and one side of the canyon is 100 feet high, and the other side was about fifty feet high. We had to clear out the trees, and to do that, we used bulldozers, and we stacked all the trees in one area so that they would dry out, and then I could burn them the next spring.

I used to fly up every weekend with my own airplane to be in charge of my vineyard, to get it going. I'd come up and I'd keep trying to burn down those big stacks of trees. One day I came up, it was April 4, and April 1 was supposedly the end of the burn period. I had been waiting patiently to burn all that stuff. [long pause] So anyway, so I came up, it was April 4, and I started a fire, and two of the stacks were burning real good, but four wouldn't burn right away.

I went back to the vineyard where I had some diesel fuel, and I started to throw the diesel fuel onto those other four stacks when I noticed that a little fire had started at what is now the barbecue area where we have some rocks and we barbecue. The wind apparently had blown some of the fire, the leaves or so, onto the dead leaves at the edge of the vineyard, in this new dugout area which was going to be the lake.

I thought that I'd be able to easily stamp it out with my big feet, and I tried that, but it didn't work. So then I got some pails that I used to go down to the creek and thought I'd haul the water up, up this steep hill. I'd throw the water on, but the blaze would keep on going higher and higher. And meantime, I'm thinking, I could get a heart attack back here, because it's so isolated and nobody would know, because I'm going up and down that hill, trying to get that fire out as

fast as I could. It kept on--as it got higher and higher up that steep hill, it started blazing more and more.

So I ran to my neighbor's, Bill Bonsall--it's Von Strassers now--and I ran over, dashed into his house without knocking, I just ran to the phone and I called the Calistoga Fire Department, and they called the Forestry Service. We had seventy guys up here fighting that fire.

After that, when I'd go into the town of Calistoga, kids would point up to me and say, "There's that guy from Los Angeles who almost burned down Diamond Mountain." I thought they'd forget, but there was this article that said, "Ten years ago Al Brounstein started a fire on Diamond Mountain." Pretty soon there will be another article saying, "Thirty years ago, Al Brounstein--." They won't let me forget. [laughter]

Anyway, we were able to burn out the underbrush. As a matter of fact, the Indians used to do this every spring anyway. If you notice back there, all the trees are still standing. What we did is we burned down a lot of underbrush. It was a spring burn and a cool burn, you might say, because the ground was still moist. It was April, and sometimes we have rains as late as the end of April. Mostly around the end of March, you can almost depend upon it not raining any more.

So anyway, now we had cleared out, and now--

Hicke: Are we coming to the flood story now?

Brounstein: Yes, but what happened there is we used road-building equipment to bring all the soil from the shallow end to the deep end, because--[pause]

Hicke: Of the lake?

Brounstein: Well, it was going to be the lake, and we knew that from one end to another was a twenty-five foot drop. So we built our dam there, and it's a terrific dam. But what happened is we didn't build the spillway deep enough or wide enough. One day there was a five-inch rain in northern California, and that dam filled up so fast in just that one day that the spillway couldn't handle it. Now, normally that area holds 6 million gallons of water. At that time it was 20 million gallons of water. If that water had gone over--it was six inches from the top when I got a call from my vineyard manager, Dick Steltzner, who makes his own wine and sells it. [Steltzner Vineyards] He's a great guy. He calls me and says, "Al,

you've got to get up here. The dam's about to burst, and you're going to have to warn all the neighbors to get out of their homes." So I said, "Don't do a thing until I get up there." (I was living in San Francisco now.)

Hicke: A little closer.

Brounstein: So I dashed up there, and I was in mud up to my knees at times. There was such a downpour. I looked up at the sky and I'd say, "Is this ever going to stop?" Dick says, "Al, it's not going to rain forty days and forty nights." [laughter]

Hicke: It just seems that way.

Brounstein: What we did was we dug an auxiliary spillway in an area off to the side of where the real spillway is, and we dug down about a foot and a half. That was enough to draw the water through this other area, which is all part of the dam structure--darn structure, I should say [laughter] in that case. So it brought this excess water through the Gravelly Meadow and wiped out almost 100 vines, but it saved the dam.

So anyway, that's the fire and the flood, and I'll spare you the pestilence and the famine.

Hicke: And I don't want any locust plague either!

Finance and Banking

Hicke: You also said you would tell me about dealing with Wells Fargo Bank and the other banks.

Brounstein: Oh, yes. Well, 1976 was a drought year. So I went to the bank and I said I wanted to renew my note, like I'd been trying to do every year.

Hicke: This is Wells Fargo?

Brounstein: Yes, in Santa Rosa. He says, "How much wine did you make?" I says, "2,000 gallons." He says, "But you thought you'd do 8,000." I says, "Yes, but there's a drought." He says, "So what's the big deal? Why didn't you just buy some grapes like everybody else does?" I says, "I can't do that. It's against my concept." He didn't know that I had special grapes. I said I wasn't going to blend just ordinary grapes into mine.

##

Brounstein: So he says, "If you don't want to buy grapes, we don't want to bank you. We want our money." So that was the low point of my business life, because here I was--he says, "I'm doing you a favor by putting you out of business, because you're not going to make it. You're never going to make it." "But I'm going to price the next vintage at $12.50 a bottle," I said. He responded, "You'll never get that big a price for your wine."

Hicke: You had a lot of nay-sayers to deal with.

Brounstein: Yes. So just then, at that time, PCA--Production Credit [Association], part of the Land Bank--decided they wanted to go into Napa to expand. They were in Santa Rosa, now they wanted to expand into Napa, and I would be one of their first clients. So what they did is they used my land as collateral, not just the wine as the other banker did.

Hicke: That's quite a risk though, isn't it?

Brounstein: For them?

Hicke: No, for you.

Brounstein: Well, but I had no alternative. I had no other place to go. What had happened was a friend of mine didn't lend me the money, he guaranteed a loan of $100,000 with Wells Fargo Bank. When Wells Fargo wanted to close me down, my friend says don't let them cash in the stock that he had pledged to guarantee my note with Wells Fargo. He says, "My stock is now at $6.50, and I know it's going to go up, and I don't want to have them cash it in."

So I was lucky enough to find PCA ready, willing, and able to give me the money to take out Wells Fargo. So now, my friend's collateral was not affected, but a few years later he called me up and he says, "The stock is now at $30.00 and I'd love to get it back so I can cash it in." I says, "Well, I'll do the best I can." I talked to my loan manager and he says, "Al, I can't do that. I can't let you have that stock now because we have a red flag on your account, and we just need all the collateral we can get."

So that meant I had to forget about having him getting his stock back. But then a few years later, we had been getting some high marks in the wine community, we were first in the Napa Valley Auction, and we had the cover of this Wine

Spectator--all these wonderful things. So now I called up my friend--I asked my banker, I says, "Can I have my stock back now?" He says, "Don't worry, we have plenty of collateral. Your land is worth so much money now that we're not worried about you. You're no longer on the critical list."

Now my friend's stock had gone up to $60.00. And because I forced him to keep the stock from selling out at $30.00 to $60.00 he was able to double his money. Wasn't that a nice story?

Hicke: [laughs] That was good of you to do that.

Brounstein: Yes, how about that? He was a great friend.

Customers and Pricing

Hicke: There's one thing that we really haven't talked much about, and that is how you developed your customers, and how you decided on the price niche that you were going to--

Brounstein: Oh, yes. Well, of course, we did depend upon the goodwill of wine writers, and their understanding what we were doing.

Hicke: Well, their goodwill depends on your wine, so--

Brounstein: Yes. Well, they liked our wine. Most of them liked our wine. Some of them didn't like it. We had one wine writer who said, "I never did like Diamond Creek." The first time he ever wrote us up, this was a guy in New York, he says, "I never did like it." But we always felt our wine was not for everyone. Our wine is for people of special taste.

Hicke: You started out at what price, now?

Brounstein: Well, we started out at $7.50 a bottle.

Hicke: This was the 1972?

Brounstein: Yes. Then it went up to ten dollars--no, nine dollars--then ten dollars. But then--

Hicke: That was a lot for those days, wasn't it?

Brounstein: It was, but when we came in first in the Napa Valley Auction, that was in 1981, I think it was.

Hicke: For which wine? The '78?

Brounstein: We were in the second Napa Valley Auction. It was our '78 Lake. Oh, that's another story. Then we were able to raise the price of our regular wine to $12.50, but the Lake wine--we only had one barrel of it. We'd made only one barrel of the '78 Lake, and here's what happened there: we priced that vineyard at $25.00 a bottle.

Talking about good wine writers and bad wine writers: these were the good guys. It was called the Underground Wine Journal, and they had pinpointed their clientele to the very people that I wanted to sell to. They went out after the collectors, people who love wine and who are willing to age it by laying it down.

So what happened is, they would come up, before the '78, they would come up, and I would give these wine writers a bung hammer and a piece of chalk and I'd say, "Just mark every barrel that you take your sample out of, and I'm not going to stick around to try to influence you to tell you what I think of the wine or what others think of the wine. So you make up your own mind."

Let's see, who was it? Was it John Tilson, or his wife? I think John said, "Al, what was that barrel that you had down there marked--" see, we mark our barrel Volcanic Hill, first pick, second pick, third pick. And then we had one, we marked it, we called it Lake, and this was developed after my other three vineyards. He said, "What's that one marked Lake?" I says, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do with it. I might use it for topping wines. It's only one barrel. I can't make a big splash with it."

He says, "Why don't you sell me the barrel and make it into twenty-four cases of wine, and I'll buy the whole thing." I says, "Well, I can't do that. But I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll put it under its own label, and I'll sell you four cases." He says, "That's fine."

Anyway, then he wrote it up, and he says it's one of the best wines he's ever had. He gave it a nineteen or something out of twenty, which he never gave anybody. So I got a call from a friend of mine, one of my customers, Northridge Hills in southern California, and he says, "Al, I want some of that wine." I says, "Paul, I can't do that, because if I gave you,

I'd have to give all the other guys, and I don't have that much wine, and I'm sure I'd antagonize somebody unless I had enough to spread around." He says, "Tell you what, if you will put your wine in an auction with the [Napa Valley] vintners, I guarantee that I've got a guy who will bid $2,000 for a case of that wine."

Well, my ears picked up on that one, and I says, Well, I didn't want to join the Vintners so that I could become eligible to put my wine in the auction, because the Vintners wanted fifteen dollars a month, and I didn't want to spend the money. [laughter] I says, "Even though I got a lunch out of it, I can't just dissipate my money like that. But I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll join if you promise me that this guy will come up and he'll bid $2,000."

So the night before the auction, the guy came by and he says, "I want to introduce myself, because I've been watching your wine, and I want to get that wine." So I says, "Well, I wish you luck." Anyway, so the next day, we had the bidding, and I was lot number 400. It was getting late at night, and cold in that tent, and Boots was saying, "Nobody's going to bid. There's nobody left around to bid." They'd all gone home, it was cold and miserable.

So then out of the blue, two guys started bidding against each other. They bid it up to $5,400, and we were ecstatic, and jumping up and down. We came in first in the second Napa Valley auction. So that's sort of what made our reputation. That's really what started us off and, to this day, the Lake is still considered to make the best of all of my vineyards. However, there are plenty of other--oh, you know what, let's get that French article.[2]

Boots B.: In addition, why don't you tell Carole about the auctioneer's reaction to the high bids?

Brounstein: Oh, yes. Well, that was Michael Broadbent. Did you ever hear of him?

Hicke: Oh, yes.

Brounstein: Well, Michael says, "How could this be? I've never heard of this guy, and out of nowhere, he walks off with--" he couldn't believe it. And we were back in London just recently, and

---

[2] "Une rivière de diamants," La Revue du Vin de France, Juillet-Août 1998.

they were saluting Michael Broadbent because he was retiring from the staff of Decanter and from Christie's Auctioneer.

Boots B.: No, they were just honoring him.

Brounstein: Oh, they were just honoring him. So he made mention, he looks at Boots and I and he turned to the audience and he says, "Here's Diamond Creek. When I first met them, I'd never heard of them, and I couldn't believe that they could make any impact, because who was Diamond Creek?" But now he knows very well.

Boots B.: Now we've become great friends.

Brounstein: And now, if you'd noticed, but I'm sure you didn't, there's a little granite block--right now we don't know where to put it yet--but it was carved out of granite by a friend of ours, an artist, and it was a bird's eye view of our vineyards. Michael Broadbent saw this, it was being offered during the time he was going to be the auctioneer, and he says, "When I saw that carving in that block of granite, I had to see the vineyard." So he called us up, and he and his wife came out, and they said, "We had to see it with our own eyes to see what a sensational situation you have here." He's been a great guy.

Hicke: That's a good story.

Brounstein: Probably the most important recent event is we got a call from a fellow named Bipen Dessai. His country of origin is India, but he's very, very involved in wine. He knows all the important collectors in southern California. As a matter of fact, he's doing a tasting for Ridge Vineyards which will be conducted in southern California.

But for northern California, this was his first venture into northern California. He knows many wine writers throughout the United States and the world. He invited eighteen wine writers to attend a tasting of every wine that we ever made. He asked me to give up wines that I would almost die for, because I was down to so just few of them, and some of my first wines that I ever made, and I had hoped to keep them for many, many years. But by the time we got through inviting the people that he felt we should have, instead of using no more than three bottles of any vintage, we had to use five bottles of every vintage just to satisfy the number of people that the French Laundry [Restaurant] was able to accommodate, because they had very little space relatively.

So we were limited to invite only enough people to fill the French Laundry, and we did that two days in a row, where the French Laundry gave up their normal luncheon period for a tasting of Diamond Creek wines. Also, in San Francisco, we were featured at Postrio restaurant, which also gave up a Friday night where they are busy, busy, busy, so that all of my customers were able to fit into their accommodations at that restaurant.

So we had two of the best restaurants in northern California featuring Diamond Creek wines. Then we had wine writers that came from Japan, they came from Italy, from Germany, from France, Canada, England. It was fantastic. And for three days, this was three of the worst stormy days we had during that whole winter.

Hicke: Which year? Last year?

Brounstein: That was last year.

Boots B.: No, no, we're still in '98: it was February of '98.

Hicke: Okay, last winter but this year.

Brounstein: Even Jim Laube of the Wine Spectator, who has easy access to my place, because we're relatively close, even he was subjected to listening to my discussions of the importance of soil in winemaking, and now for the first time, to be able to tell them how we will be discussing from now on microclimates and wine, and how microclimates make a difference, as does soil. Even Jim Laube had never heard this story, as I was now able to discuss it, because I had the floor 100 percent, and these people were trapped, and they had to listen to my story.

Hicke: I don't think they were complaining. At least, I can't imagine they were.

Brounstein: No, because the food was sensational.

Hicke: And the wine was all right!

Brounstein: The beauty of it was, this is the best part: of all those ninety-four wines, although some were not sensational wines, they were all good, but not one was over the hill. These are wines all the way from 1972 to--let's see, where are we?--almost 2002. So almost thirty-year-old wines, and they're still alive and delicious and interesting. Some, of course, are better than others, but now people were able to find out what I do to make my wine the best that I can make, and

hopefully considered to be among the best of the United States.

Jerry Luper told me when I first became involved with him, he says, "Yes, it's true, France does make very fine wine, but we've got the winner. France will make good wine three years out of ten, and California will make good wine seven years out of ten." So based on that, I feel that over the long run, the world will find out that they can depend upon California wines over and over and year by year, over even the French, as good as they are. We do admit the French make good wine, but I have a little saying that I said in French when I was invited to Roederer Champagne [House]. I had a little expression, and although my French is relatively meager, I was able to say, "We love the French, because they taught us how to make wine, they also taught us how to sell wine, and most important, they taught us how to raise prices." [laughter] And, "Pour ca, je suis un bon etudiant"--for that I am a good student!

When I was invited to Montreal, I also used this French--I made this into a French expression. They also loved it. But deep down, although we were kidding, deep down we find that to a great degree, people equate good wine with big prices. On our last release, we sold our wine much faster at a higher price than we ever had before than our previous year. When we had it at seventy-five dollars a bottle, it sold out quite rapidly, but not as fast as when we raised the price to --when we announced the price is going to be a hundred dollars a bottle, before one bottle was labeled, it had all been committed.

Hicke: I think that's what you call an inelastic demand curve.

Brounstein: Yes, you're right. You're a marketing person, yourself, I see. You're conversant with that expression.

Actually, what happens is there is an inelastic demand--inelastic in the respect that we haven't tapped that level. In other words, if we were to go to $1,000, I'm not sure that we would sell the wine at all. I don't know. And I plan to take it in steps, as I have up to now. [tape interruption]

Hicke: Why don't you just say that again?

Brounstein: One fellow from Oregon brought three friends, and they charged $400 a person per restaurant, so the three friends--

Boots B.: It was more than that, Al.

Brounstein: It was $1200 a person.

Boots B.: That's the way we thought it was going to work, but it didn't work that way, because the French Laundry required more money. I think the French Laundry was $550 per event at the French Laundry, and the Postrio was, I think, $450. It's close. But one of our customers came with his whole family--children, wife, et cetera--from Hawaii and flew to California just to attend all three of our tastings. We had customers from Florida--from all over the United States--that came, and spent all of this money not only to get to us but to experience this once-in-a-lifetime tasting and the incredible food put out. Wolfgang Puck came up personally from southern California to oversee the kitchen. He was preparing his special pizzas for our party. Of course Thomas Keller was just incredible at the French Laundry. So we are so grateful to these people who put this all together for us.

Hicke: I'm sure it was a memorable occasion for all the people that came. I don't mean just you, I mean the people who came.

Boots B.: I think so. I think so, because it was a great opportunity.

Brounstein: But you know who talked Bipen Dessai into it? It was John Tilson.

Hicke: That same guy from the Underground Wine Journal.

Brounstein: Can you believe, from twenty-five years ago, he was still--

Boots B.: Because I don't think Bipen Dessai really knew that much about Diamond Creek.

Brounstein: No, he didn't know about us that much, but he was convinced by John Tilson's sincerity that I should be invited, and he didn't know that I would accept so readily, but I did, because I knew of Bipen Dessai's reputation. He sold 100 years of Chateau Latour. He had a tasting of 100 years, but he was not able to get every vintage, and he actually, at that tasting, he had forty-six wines from Chateau Latour. But from us, ninety-four wines.

Boots B.: Bipen said that this was the largest undertaking--

Brounstein: --he's ever done.

Boots B.: --he'd ever done, and he really had no idea that we had so many wines, and we worked on this together--he's incredible! And it's a hobby for him. And put it together, and finding

these wines. He said that he just had no idea he was going to have such a great response.

Hicke: It was a surprise for him too.

##

Brounstein: I want to be the Romanée-Conti--that's my aspiration, I feel that I'm one that's qualified to be at that level because, first of all, of all the contenders, the recent contenders, I have the track record of consistency. Then second of all, some of those so-called new kids on the block may or may not make it, and we have survived. We've demonstrated that we can survive all these years, and as you see with my new office, it looks like we are successful.

Storing the Early Barrels of Wine

Hicke: You're going to be here for a while. Let's go back just quickly to when you were first starting and there was a problem with storing the barrels, and so you stored them all around, is that right?

Brounstein: Yes, okay. Well, here's what happened. We were allowed by the BATF to store in other people's facility, as does Koerner Rombauer. That's a business for him. He not only stores for them, but he makes the wine for them. And yet, they can call themselves whatever they want to call themselves, and he's not the only one. The fellow that makes Judd's Hill wine for himself, he makes wine for half a dozen other people. And they put it out of their own label, because they don't have the facilities.

Hicke: We were talking about your original problem with storing the wine.

Brounstein: The first place we went to, I think that was the first, was the Joseph Phelps. Joseph Phelps had just opened up his winery, and he didn't have it very filled, because he was just getting going. Then after that, we went to V. Sattui Winery, and Daryl [Sattui] was thrilled that we asked to store our wine there, because people would come into his place, and he hadn't made wine yet, and they'd say, "Well, where's the wine?" And he says, "Well, I'll be making it next year." He felt inadequate, so he was thrilled to see me, and I was

thrilled to see him. But after a year, he too filled up his place.

Then we went over nearby to Dr. Novak's, and that's now called Spottswoode [Winery]. Dr. Novak had a little cave that he had burrowed into the ground, and it was very small but it was adequate for my needs. But then about six months after we had moved in, he died, and we had to move out.

So then we went over to Alexander Valley to Alexander Valley Vineyards, and that was Hank Wetzel. Finally, I wound up at Jerry Sep's place, and we were friends. He let me have space at his tunnels, and that's for Zinfandel. He makes a great Zinfandel wine.

Hicke: So how many years was it that you had to store--

Brounstein: For at least six years, I had to store my wine elsewhere. Oh, more than that--it was about nine years, when you consider three years up here with Gene Hill at the present Sterling Vineyards, Diamond Mountain.

Hicke: And then there was the time you made the wine in the driveway.

Brounstein: Yes. Well, that was when we bottled it. At that time, we had space in our garage, which was a bonded winery too, and as well, then we had to bottle it. To bottle it, we called up the BATF and they said, "Well, you don't have room in the garage." We were stacked up high. I'll show you bung marks where bungs would pop the cork, and it would spray wine on the ceiling. Anyway, so he says, "Well, as long as you don't have bottling space inside, we'll just bond this driveway of yours." They made a mark like this and this and this, just around the periphery, and it was a bonded driveway. I was the only bonded driveway in Napa Valley.

Boots B.: It was really exciting.

Hicke: Probably in the world!

Brounstein: Yes, probably in the world.

Hicke: Oh, that's great.

Brounstein: So that's our story.

Distribution

Hicke: I just have one more question that I want to ask, and that is, who are your customers? Are they restaurants, individuals?

Brounstein: They're all. We thought at first that restaurants would not be interested in our wine, because it was a big wine, it had to have age to soften down. We would first set aside, oh, about 15, 20 percent of our wine for restaurants. Let's say 15 at that time. We would then ask the restaurateur to hold the wine--we would hold it two years before we would offer it to our restaurant customer, and then we would ask them to hold it two years. They would agree to do it, but whether they did or not, that was their affair once they bought the wine. They would say, "Look, it's my wine, I'll do what I please with it." When they were nasty like that, I just wouldn't sell them my wine the following release.

Hicke: Because they opened it too soon?

Brounstein: I says, "You're killing a baby." I didn't want to sell to restaurants in the first place, but they would come to me, and they said that they have heavy demand. I was really fussy in the beginning. I wouldn't sell outside of California.

Hicke: Whom did you sell to?

Brounstein: I would sell to retailers. Now, in California, I sold Beltramo's and Jackson's and [Darrel] Corti, they were my first accounts. And then in restaurants, I had Valentino's--that's Piero. Piero--I forget his last name.

And also it was Giani Paoletti. He broke away from Valentino's and he started his own restaurant in Brentwood, and he now has over 120 cases of our wine in his cellar for just one restaurant. Isn't that terrific?

Hicke: Yes!

Brounstein: And let's see. Then we were talked into going out of the state by the Red Arrow in Chicago and by--who was it?--in New York. Oh, Wine Tasters of Westchester.

Hicke: Is that a store?

Brounstein: That's a store in Westchester. We were successful right off the bat. We sold right through really fast, and so we did expand in the United States. But then it went to foreigners--

let's see, who was the first? I think Sweden. Yes, I think they were the first to approach us.

Hicke: They approached you?

Brounstein: Yes, they approached us. I wouldn't go out of the country looking for customers, because they would all come to us. If they had a good list of my friends--if Joe Heitz was one of their wines that they sold, or if Warren Winiarski, people like that, then I would sell my wine. So they did all the groundwork for me.

Hicke: You hardly need a marketing staff at all, do you?

Brounstein: No, I really don't. Well, of course, we did start out looking for customers. The first year that we searched out customers, we went to Texas and New Orleans and Florida and Washington, D.C. Now, Washington, D.C., that was a new venture. What we did is, the French were doing futures. We liked the idea, and we all got together, or whoever was involved--

Hicke: You mean other wineries?

Brounstein: Yes. Like Bob Long and Steltzner, guys like that. Randy Dunn was there. Warren Winiarski didn't want to get in it, and I don't think Shramsberg did either. I can't recall.

But anyway, we were the first group to go out after futures. I was in the forefront of that. I was pushing it like mad. We got just about everyone, too, who was going to go to McArthur's, who was invited there. We got just about everyone to go into a futures program, but some said, "No, I sell all that I want to sell in a short period of time, and I don't want to be involved in futures. I don't want to sell my wine at a discount."

But we raised the prices and then sold it at a discount, so we did okay. That's known as a Chinese markup. [laughter]

Hicke: And how long did you do futures? You don't do that any more, do you?

Brounstein: It was difficult getting out of it, because they're all looking for bargains. Little by little, I would drop one here, drop another there, until now, I think I have one left. Or two maybe. But at a very modest discount, and hopefully, I try to do that so that they can make additional profit, not so that they can let the customer buy it at an off price.

Hicke: So these are distributors that are getting the futures?

Brounstein: Yes. Well, the distributors, I have about fifty of those. Isn't that something?

And this is the reason why we sell more wine than we have got wine. I really don't like to be in a position where I don't have enough customers to sell all the wine I make. I like to have more customers than I have wine, and I like to sell it all out, and then not worry about it for another year. It's really nice that way. In the meantime, the French can make their move either upward or downward, and then I feel that I'm in a way at their mercy, because if they're raising their prices, I'd better raise mine, or people will feel that the wine is no good. Otherwise, if it was good, I'd raise my price to my competition.

So we're very aware of what our neighbor is doing, whether he's the neighbor across the ocean or just down at Warren Winiarski's. If he raised his price to a hundred and a quarter, I'd have to raise my price. But that's the way it is.

Hicke: It's called keeping up with the neighbors--or friends across the ocean. [laughs]

Brounstein: It seems to be that way. My point is that there's a market, a small market at the upper level. There's a little bit bigger market below that, a bigger market, until you get to the ten-dollar bottle or twelve-dollar bottle, and that you've got a huge market for that. But I really like it better up there on top. It's easier to breathe. [laughter] And you're so happy that you're able to sell it so fast. They in turn can sell it. Then, of course, if you have the support of the media, what more could you ask?

Future Directions

Hicke: Yes. Well, just to round this off with the future, do you see any possibility of expansion, or do you see any changes?

Brounstein: I do not want to make one extra barrel. We will be making a touch more wine when the Petit Verdot comes in, because that's a brand new vineyard, and also even when the lower part of Red Rock Terrace comes in, because we are planted five-by-sevens [rows] instead of eight-by-twelves. So eight-by-twelves gives

you ninety-six square feet for the vine to be able to reach out and get all the nourishment it wants, as against five-by-sevens that give it only thirty-five, one-third as much soil, and therefore, they compete with each other for the soil and for the moisture, because we do not irrigate our vines. We dry farm.

Hicke: You told me this story while we were out driving around, but tell me again about why you planted the vineyard eight-by-eight, I think it was, that first one.

Brounstein: Yes, I did that eight-by-eight. You do pay attention, don't you? You're terrific. Eight-by-eight, only because of aesthetic purposes. In other words--

Hicke: Yes, start at the beginning with that one.

Brounstein: If you were out swimming in that lake--

Hicke: Wait a minute: this vineyard is near the lake--this is the Lake Vineyard.

Brounstein: Yes, the Lake Vineyard.

Hicke: Okay. I just wanted to establish that.

Brounstein: It is so pretty. But--

Hicke: So if you're out in the lake, you can see the vineyard very well.

Brounstein: And you look up at that vineyard. Normally, if it was eight-by-twelve, you'd see an expanse of soil, and that's about all, because the vines wouldn't show up much in proportion to the amount of soil. But eight-by-eights gives you sixty-four square feet, and as a matter of fact, at that time, in those days, it wasn't really big enough. It should have been eight-by-nines, because at that time we draped.

Hicke: Yes, we didn't talk about the canopy system either.

Brounstein: Yes. We now go upright, straight up, and we attach it to the wires as we go up. We have wires at different levels. Then we tie our vine to that wire. That gives us less foliage in relation to the amount of the juice. We now are at a relationship of, instead of nine to five, with nine parts of foliage to five of the juice, of the wine juice, grape juice, it is now seven to five instead of nine to five, the relationship. So that now, they will be struggling against

each other, there will be a fight to see who gets the water, to see who gets the food. We do use compost. We are starting that for the first time. We have started putting compost around our vines.

Hicke: And you make your own compost, you also told me that, but not on the tape.

Brounstein: Yes, we do. We have the Compost Alley, as I showed you. It's constant--there's always some compost going.

But anyway, we are very upbeat on the future. We think we have nowhere to go but up, and we feel that the wine industry has just scratched the surface of potential wine drinkers. We've seen the industry go from Portuguese rosés, what do they call them?

Hicke: Mateus?

Brounstein: Yes, Mateus. And then to White Zinfandel, now to Merlot, and very shortly they will be graduating to Cabernet with Merlot, but with a relatively small percentage of Merlot, which we use strictly as a softening aspect to the wine. We don't want to have 100 percent Cabernet. It's just too harsh, and it just overwhelms.

Hicke: Is the Petit Verdot going to be blended?

Brounstein: Yes, it's going to be blended into our three vineyards. However, we are going to be open to that. We may blend the three vineyards--

Hicke: This is the Three Vineyards label you're talking about?

Brounstein: Yes. No, we won't use the Three Vineyard blend. We won't call it that. But we'll use each of the three vineyards, but we will say that they have 1 or 2 percent Petit Verdot. What we might do is blend Petit Verdot into Gravelly Meadow, which is next-door neighbor, or very likely we will do Petit Verdot into the Lake. It all depends on how that Petit Verdot turns out. It could be even better than the Lake. There's a possibility. That's the only reason I decided to go in there: I felt that with the exposure of the sun--now, it's got that rise. It has a 30-degree rise where the Lake is flat. But right across the creek from the Lake is Petit Verdot, and it rises up at a 30-degree angle. If you go any higher, they wouldn't allow you to put in vines.

So we don't go to 40 or 45 degrees, we go up to the 30, and then that's the extent of our involvement in Petit Verdot. But that exposure is very much like our Volcanic Hill exposure. It's the same facing to the south, and because it would be a little cooler than Volcanic Hill, it could make a difference between the coolness of the Lake grapes just down below them and against the warmth of Volcanic Hill, and although they both get pretty much the same--well, the Lake doesn't get as much sunshine as the Petit Verdot.

So what I'm saying is, we have a lot of experimenting to do and a lot of microclimating to do to see what's going to happen with that one little acre. What are we going to really do with it? How are we going to work it? We're going to be working our tasting panel overtime to see what approach we should take. Should it be Petit Verdot, 1 or 2 percent? Should it be Petit Verdot and Gravelly Meadow 50-50? Should it be Lake and Petit Verdot 50-50? Should it be 75 Petit Verdot, 25 Lake? I mean, we have all these possibilities.

And this is what my customers are going to love. If I come out with all these different variations, and if they can detect them--and if I can detect them, they'll be able to detect them--they will have as much fun out of it as I do. We do have these four days [a year] that we're open, and I'm almost positive that 50 to 75 percent of the people who buy my wine on a regular basis, on a direct basis, I think they've all been up to see my vineyards.

Hicke: They must be very interested.

Brounstein: I see their names, they keep popping up over and over and over again. They've stuck with me all these years, and I've seen their kids grow from little kids to now they're drinkers. They started out when they were ten, we'll say, and now that they're twenty-one, they can drink.

In any event, it's an intimate situation. First of all, we know most of the retailers. We do know all the distributors. We know a lot of the restaurants. We were forced to go into these fabulous restaurants and have their fantastic food.

Hicke: Somebody has to do it, you know!

Brounstein: This is such a great business, because every time we go out, even with the vintners, when we do a tour and we're visiting four cities in four days, sure, we get behind a counter and we're pouring the wine, but we keep seeing our friends come up

to say hi, because they've been buying our wine. We're in an atmosphere where the hotels where we display our wine want to put up good little hors d'oeuvres so that they can attract the people. Then there are the various donations that are made to these charities, because a lot of these are charitable events. So that brings in a lot of new people.

Anyway, it's just one big party after another.

Hicke: Oh, that's a great note to stop on.

Brounstein: It really is, it's just wonderful. And then we get paid on top of it, to be able to attend these parties. Isn't that nice?

Hicke: I know we could talk for a long, long time, but I think we should end here, at least for now.

Transcribed by Shannon Page
Final Typed by Grace Robinson and Amelia Archer

TAPE GUIDE--Albert Brounstein

diamond creek

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Exclusively

Location: Located on Diamond Mountain in the northern Mayacamas Range of the Napa Valley, the Diamond Creek property has three separate vineyards, each with a distinct microclimate and soil type. Diamond Creek Vineyards is open to visitors four days a year, by invitation from the winery's mailing list.

Owners: Al and Boots Brounstein

Winemaker: Phil Steinschriber

Production: 2500-3500 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon

Appellation: Napa Valley

History: Born in Saskatchewan, Canada and raised in Minnesota, Al Brounstein became a successful pharmaceuticals wholesaler in Southern California in 1960's. In 1968, he purchased 70 acres of land on rugged Diamond Mountain in the Napa Valley. Brounstein was inspired by the great wines of Bordeaux and had long dreamed of owning his own small vineyard and winery. In clearing his property to plant vineyards, Brounstein noticed three distinctly different soil types. Recalling the importance of soil type to the great estates of Bordeaux and burgundy, Brounstein planted the property as three separate vineyards, each on a different soil. Top quality Cabernet Sauvignon was Brounstein's goal, and he planted the land primarily with Cabernet Sauvignon, along with some Merlot and Cabernet Franc for blending. His first crop came in 1972 and the wine was made by Jerry Luper. After harvesting the first crop, Brounstein and Luper kept the three vineyards separate. They later determined there were sufficient differences between the lots to warrant separate bottlings, and thus was born Diamond Creek's unique program of vineyard designated wines.

Vineyards: ***Red Rock Terrace***
A seven acre vineyard with reddish-brown soil

Gravelly Meadow
A five acre vineyard with gravel, sand soil and a cooler climate

Volcanic Hill
An eight acre, south facing hillside vineyard with white volcanic ash

Lake
A three quarter acre vineyard with grave, sand soil and the coolest microclimate: usually blended into Gravelly Meadow, except in outstanding years.

Wines: Diamond Creek vineyards releases three vineyard designated Cabernet Sauvignons each vintage; Red Rock Terrace, Gravelly Meadow and Volcanic Hill. In certain years when conditions produce an exceptional wine, a Lake Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon is released. Six Lake Cabernets have been released since 1972 (1978, 1984, 1987, 1990, 1992, and 1994). The 1995 Red Rock Terrace, Gravelly Meadow and Volcanic Hill wines are priced at $75 per bottle. The 1994 Lake Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon is priced at $250 per bottle, a record price for an American wine.

Diamond Creek Vineyards 1500 Diamond Mountain Road Calistoga, California 94515 (707) 942-6926
Fax: (707) 942-6936

Microclimates

1996 LAKE

750ml

$300* plus tax

Release Date: September 1, 1998

We have another winner!

The 1996 **LAKE** will continue our track-record first established with the famous 1978 vintage. In extraordinary weather conditions, this tiny ¾ acre vineyard produces an outstanding wine. However, less than 100 cases of the 750ml size will be produced. This is only the seventh offering in twenty-six years.

A recent summary of LAKE, 1995 to 1997:

- **No 1995 LAKE was produced.**
- **Less than 100 cases of 1996 LAKE 750ml bottles will be available.**
- **There will be no 1997 LAKE produced in the 750ml size.**

To be distinct from our regular offering the bottles will be painted to depict our Lake vineyard and packed in an attractive wooden box signed by Al B.

Grapevine

Diamond Creek's Cabernet Sauvignon Lake 1996 will sell for $300 a bottle when it is released this summer. At this price, a $50 increase from the 1994 Lake, the wine remains the most expensive bottling made in the United States.

JUNE 15, 1998 • WINE SPECTATOR

1996 Red Rock Terrace MicroCLIMATE #3

750ml

$150* plus tax

Release Date: September 1, 1998

There are always differences in ripening time in sections of our vineyards. If the difference is significant, the wine is given the MicroCLIMATE designation. To be distinct from the regular offering these bottles will be painted to depict our terrace and packed in an attractive wooden box signed by Al B.
Our tasting panel, comprised of Dr. Richard Peterson, his daughter Heidi Peterson-Barrett, Leo McCloskey, President of Enologix, Phil Steinschriber, our winemaker and Al Brounstein, selected Red Rock Terrace MicroCLIMATE #3 as an exceptional lot.

* No credit cards please. Out of State – Tax Exempt.

Gravelly Meadow	1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995
Red Rock Terrace	1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995
Volcanic Hill	1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995

Lake	1978, 1984, 1987, 1990, 1992, 1994
Three Vineyard Blend	1981, 1984, 1985, 1989, 1990, 1992, 19
Red Rock Terrace MicroCLIMATE 2	1991, 1994
Red Rock Terrace First Pick	1977
Red Rock Terrace Second Pick	1977
Red Rock Terrace Special Select	1982
Volcanic Hill First Pick	1979
Volcanic Hill Special Select	1982
Volcanic Hill MicroCLIMATE	1991
Gravelly Meadow Special Select	1982
Gravelly Meadow MicroCLIMATE	1991
Gravelly Meadow/Lake MicroCLIMATE	1992

THE WORLD'S BEST WINE MAGAZINE
Decanter
JULY 1998

NORM ROBY'S AMERICA

Bumper crop

The California Cabernet Society, founded in 1991 by 40 California wine producers, recently held its annual barrel tasting previewing the latest vintage. The Society members are primarily from Napa and Sonoma, but there are representatives from Paso Robles and the Santa Cruz Mountains, two small but important appellations for Cabernet Sauvignon.

Although originally conceived in part as an opportunity to offer futures to members of the wine trade, the Society now places less emphasis on this aspect of the event. This year only six producers officially offered futures deals for the 1997 crop, however, the tasting has taken on greater importance because it provides one of the first insights into the quality and character of a vintage.

1997 has the makings of an exceptional vintage for California Cabernet. The weather was almost ideal. The season began with an unusually mild spring; as a result, the fruit set was excellent, and ripening was relatively uniform. The rains in early September, which caused a few problems with Chardormay and Pinot Noir, managed to extend the growing season for Cabernet Sauvignon which, given the size of the crop, turned out to be a positive development.

The consensus favourites among the wine trade boiled down to some of the big names, plus a few surprises. Heading everyone's list was Diamond Creek's 1997 Cabernet Sauvignon from the Gravelly Meadow and Volcanic Hill vineyards, followed by Robert Mondavi's Reserve Cabernet, Pine Ridge Stags Leap District, Cain Five and Beaulieu Private Reserve. Other stars were Barnett Vineyards, Fisher with its Coach Insignia, Vine Cliff, Alexander Valley Vineyards and Franciscan's Magnificat Meritage.

Norm Roby is co-author of the best-selling
New Connoisseur's Handbook of California wine

We are honored to have been selected SEVENTH of **"The 100 most Prestigious Wines of the World"**

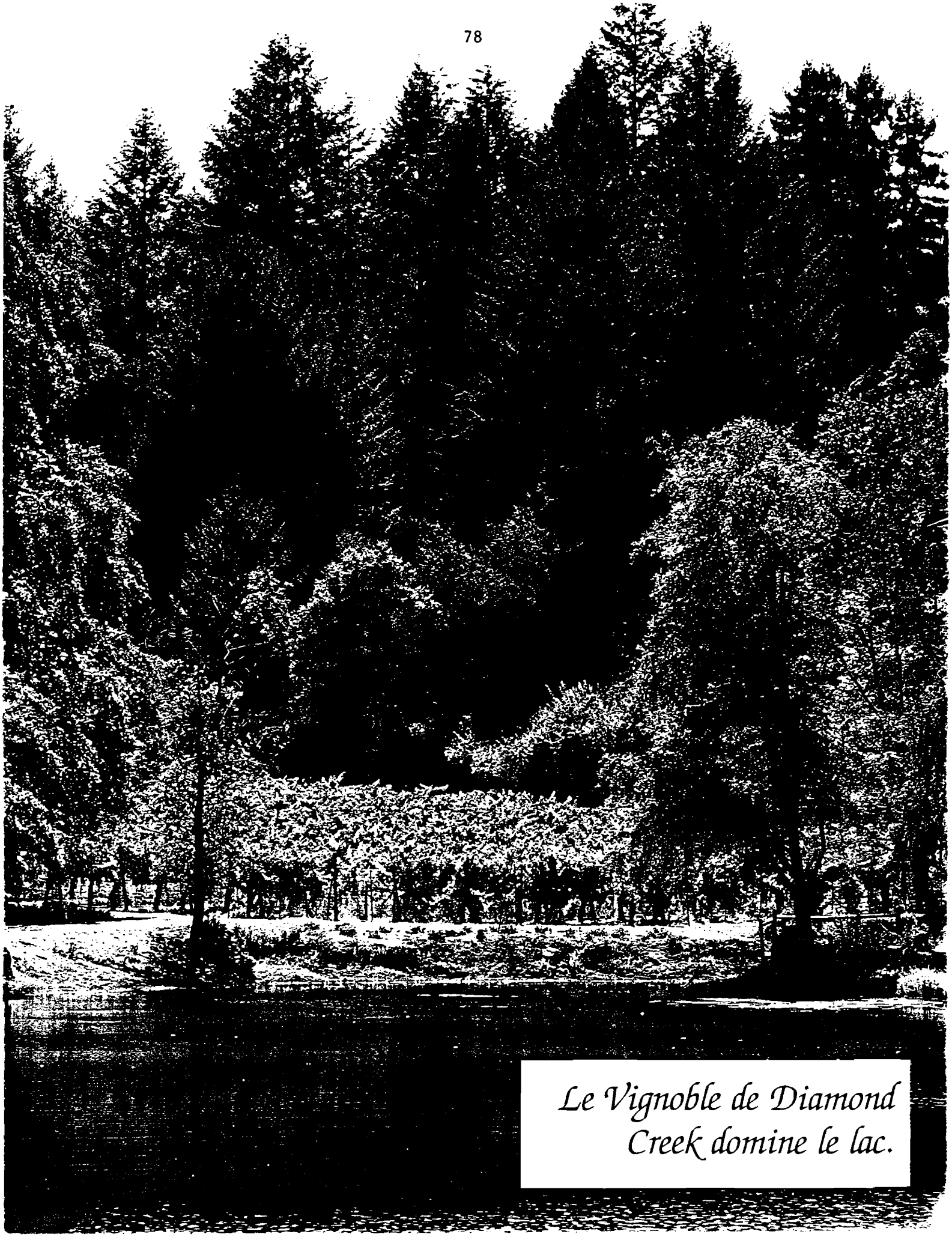
Reds

Selected by L'Or du Vin
Published by Hachette Livre

Premier exceptionnel
La Romanée-Conti

Premiers
Petrus
La Tâche, Domaine de
La Romanée-Conti
La Turque

Seconds
Richebourg, Domaine Méo-Camuzel
La Romanée, Domaine du Château de
Vosne-Romanée
Diamond Creek, Volcanic Hill
Château Lafleur
Grace Family Vineyards
Château Mouton-Rothschild
Château Ausone
Château Latour
Château Lafite
Château Cheval Blanc
Château Le Pin
Château Margaux
Bricco Rocche Ceretto
Château Haut-Brion
Château Trotanoy
Musigny, Domaine Comte
Georges de Vogüé
Caymus Vineyards, Special Selection
La Romanée Saint-Vivant, Domaine
Leroy
Stag's Leap Vine Cellars, Cask 23



Le Vignoble de Diamond Creek domine le lac.

Wednesday
January 14, 1998
The Napa Valley Register

BUSINESS

Some unique tastings of the rare Diamond Creek wines scheduled

By L. PIERCE CARSON
Register Staff Writer

Nobody's ever accused Al Brounstein of being a shrinking violet.

From the first plantings of vines to the latest release of his acclaimed wines, Al would be the first to tell you he's doing things right — and that he's got a first-class product.

Sure, Al, like any savvy novice vintner in the late 1960s, sought, received and heeded a wealth of advice from a handful of Napa Valley winemaking pioneers.

But once he realized he planted the right varietal and followed some pretty good advice about keeping grapes grown in different soils separate and apart for distinct bottlings, well, he's never looked back.

Long hailed as one of California's finest cabernet sauvignon producers, Diamond Creek Vineyards is now the focus of a very special tribute — actually an unprecedented tasting of all of the wines that Al and his delightful wife, Boots, have brought to market for the past 25 years.

Renowned Riverside collector Bipin Desai has put together a retrospective tasting of wines from all vintages and vineyards from 1972 to 1995 — close to 100 wines — and has asked Al and Boots to attend.

Actually, three tastings and attendant meals are scheduled next month — two at Thomas Keller's French Laundry in Yountville, the other at Wolfgang Puck's Postrio in San Francisco.

The events are not for the faint of heart — nor wallet. This once-in-a-lifetime vertical tasting includes all of the Diamond Creek wines, including first and second pickings, rare offerings of micro-climate bottlings, Three Vineyard blends and the six vintages of the acclaimed Lake Vineyard.

In case you don't know Diamond Creek wines, it's important to point out that Al and Boots discovered — soon after purchasing the 79-acre Diamond Mountain property in 1968 — that the 20 acres cleared for vineyard contained three distinct soil types and exposures. The vineyards, they soon learned, produced distinctly different wines.

Named after their soil composition, Volcanic Hill is eight acres of volcanic ash on a south-facing slope; Red Rock Terrace is seven acres of iron-rich red clay on a fairly steep grade with a northern exposure; Gravelly Meadow is the flattest piece — five acres of rocky gravel with a western exposure.

Additionally, Al planted a fourth vineyard, a three-quarter-acre piece that abuts a small lake, appropriately called Lake Vineyard. Since 1978, when some wine writers told Al it was the best cabernet they'd ever tasted in California, Lake Vineyard grapes have been bottled separately — in vintages when Al thinks the wines are worthy of a separate bottling. At most, Al gets two barrels of wine from the Lake Vineyard — one of which he bottles and sells in limited quantities (at $200 a bottle) to Diamond Creek collectors, and the other he gives to charity.

Production at California's first cabernet-only estate peaks at 3,500 cases in a good year. That's because the mountainside vines produce small berries and crop yields are low, resulting in deeply colored, richly concentrated wines.

Early on, some enophiles felt the huge, tannic wines, when tasted young, would never come around. Now, with over two decades of wines on which to draw, fans of spectacular cabernet sauvignon know that Diamond Creek wines have a sweet, aromatic inner core of fruit that, when allowed to age for seven to 10 years, produce one of California's greatest cabernet experiences.

REGISTER FILE PHOTO

Al Brounstein is seen on some of his vineyard property.

To get a taste of Diamond Creek's incredible '74, '78, '80, '84, '85, '86 and '87 vintages is, for any aficionado, well worth the price of admission to one of the upcoming tastings. However, those who attend will also get to taste '90, '91 and '92 wines, all of which have gotten extremely high marks from the nation's top wine publications, with Napa wine writer James Laube awarding hard-to-come-by scores of 90 to 93 in the Wine Spectator.

The two tastings at the French Laundry are scheduled at noon on Saturday, Feb. 7, and Sunday, Feb. 8, and include lunch. Tariff is $400 per person. The restaurant will accommodate only those attending the special Diamond Creek retrospective tasting.

Puck will fly up from Los Angeles to prepare the dinner for those attending the Postrio event on Friday, Feb. 6, at 8 p.m. Cost of this tasting and dinner is $425 per person.

By the way, Bipin Desai — host of this exceptional Diamond Creek event — has conducted countless tastings of wines from the world's most famous vineyards, including "100 years of Chateau Latour," plus a number of the renowned estates of Burgundy and Bordeaux.

Those interested in attending one of the tastings can contact the restaurants (French Laundry, 944-0167; Postrio, 415-776-7825) or by sending a facsimile indicating one's interest to Bipin R. Desai at 909-788-5889.

With over two decades of outstanding cabernets on which to draw, winemaker Al Brounstein will be able to demonstrate, in the glass, that, as Bob Mondavi often says, "Napa Valley wines belong in the company of the finest wines of the world."

SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1998

WINE

The elite cabernets, with prices to match

CALIFORNIA produces an incredible variety of wines from a wide range of grapes. But there is still one grape that captivates wine drinkers like none other: cabernet sauvignon.

Originally an import from Bordeaux, this grape has found a friendly second home in California, where it takes on a new personality: intense mouth-filling fruit with smoky, herby flavors.

No wonder vintners have lavished attention on cabernet sauvignon, selecting the finest vineyard sites, tending the vines with care, hand-picking the ripest grapes, then aging the wines in expensive new oak barrels. What has emerged is a new class of winery committed to producing costly super-premium cabernets — sort of California's own First Growths.

This is California's royalty. To gain entrance to this exclusive group, a winery must make a cabernet that's unforgettable and price it high. With the high quality of the 1994 vintage and the promising 1995 vintage, interest in these top California cabernets has reached a frenzy. Not surprisingly, prices have climbed into the stratosphere, if you can find the wines at all. Here's a quick look:

■ **Diamond Creek** — Al Brounstein was one of the first cabernet vintners to recognize the importance of a good vineyard in making a super-premium wine. All the Diamond Creek wines are massive, deep, dark and complex. They are also among the most costly wines in the state, with some bottles priced at $250. Despite the prices, Diamond Creek wines regularly sell out well in advance by mailing list. The 1994 Diamond Creek Volcanic Hill ($75) is firm and plummy; structured with sweet oak; ripe and balanced; lovely. **95**. The 1994 Diamond Creek from the Lake Vineyard ($250) is pretty and lush with gorgeous fruit, sweet oak and lovely length; it is smooth, long and supple. **97**

San Francisco-based Anthony Dias Blue is author of "The Buyers' Guide to American Wines" and "The Complete Book of Mixed Drinks" and is a writer for trade and consumer magazines.

INDEX--Albert Brounstein

Carole E. Hicke

B.A., University of Iowa; economics

M.A., San Francisco State University; U.S. history with emphasis on the American West; thesis: "James Rolph, Mayor of San Francisco."

Interviewer/editor/writer, 1978-present, for business and law firm histories, specializing in oral history techniques. Independently employed.

Interviewer-editor, Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, 1985 to present, specializing in California legal, political, and business histories.

Author: *The Federal Judges Association in the Twentieth Century; History of Farella, Braun & Martel; Heller, Ehrman, White & McAuliffe: A Century of Service to Clients and Community*.

Editor (1980-1985) newsletters of two professional historical associations: Western Association of Women Historians and Coordinating Committee for Women in the Historical Profession.

Visiting lecturer, San Francisco State University in U.S. history, history of California, history of Hawaii, legal oral history.