

# Wine Spectator

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At Brown Estate Vineyards in California's Chiles Valley, siblings David Brown, Coral Brown-Kirk and Deneen Brown made an outstanding 1997 Zinfandel.

## A Family Affair

The Browns turned a weekend project into an outstanding Napa Valley Zinfandel

Twenty years ago, Bassett Brown had an idea for a family project: He would buy a ranch where his family could spend time together working on the property.

Brown first thought of returning to Jamaica, his homeland, in search of a fruit orchard. When that didn't work out, friends told him about California's Chiles Valley—an area east of Rutherford in the Napa Valley appellation—where a 450-acre property was for sale.

When he purchased the land, in 1981, Brown didn't plan on a full-fledged family business. But the end result of his idea is the wonderfully rich and polished Brown Estate Vineyards Zinfandel Napa Valley 1997 (91 points, \$22), the family's second release, of which 700 cases were made.

Bassett, a family physician with a practice in Los Angeles, and his wife, Marcela, worked on their new property—where they planted 10 acres of Zinfandel in 1985—with their three children, Deneen, Coral and David. "We were dragged up to the ranch during summers and vacations," recalled Deneen, now 35. "Back then, it was being 'dragged.'"

Marcela helped get the children excited about their

wine venture by challenging them to guess the various seasonings that she used in her cooking. Testing their palates later became more formalized, with white tablecloths and Riedel glasses, as the Browns held blind tastings among themselves.

The first plantings were followed in 1990 by 40 more acres, primarily of Zinfandel, with some Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. Before long, the Browns were selling grapes to wineries such as Grgich Hills, Green & Red and D-Cubed Cellars.

The Browns were so impressed by what D-Cubed winemaker Duane Dappen did with their grapes that in 1994, they decided to make wine under their own label and hired Dappen as their winemaker.

Until then, the ranch had been mainly a weekend project, but the family became more deeply involved. Deneen and David, 29, now live in a renovated Victorian house on the property. Deneen does everything from frost protection to marketing, David manages the vineyard, and Coral, 32, who is raising a family, wants to enter the winemaking side of the business.

The Browns plan to increase their wine production, starting by planting an additional 50 acres, probably of Zinfandel. Now when the family meets at the vineyard, it's the kids who are "dragging" Bassett and Marcela along, much to the delight of the proud parents.

—MaryAnn Worobiec