

# CEO of Napa Valley’s first Black-owned winery talks about the people behind its success



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Deneen Brown, in the wine cave at Brown Estate Vineyards. (Courtesy of Brown Estate Vineyards)

CEO Deneen Brown has the top title at Brown Estate Vineyard in Saint Helena, but she isn't about to take sole credit. The success of the first Black-owned winery in the Napa Valley is very much a result of family effort.

Her parents, Bassett and Marcela Brown, bought the remote property in 1980. Their three children—Deneen, David and Coral—established the Brown Estate label in the 1990s, with the first release in 2000.

It's unclear if another generation will take over the winery.

“Succession is a really important question and complex question that I think about constantly,” Deneen Brown said. “We were fortunate our parents, as much as they wanted us to take over the medical practice, they gave us the freedom to chart our own course. So I want that luxury for the next generation; to chart their own course.”

In the same breath, the 61-year-old underlined she and her siblings have no plans to step aside anytime soon.

Brown wants her wines to be accessible to newbies as well as appreciated by the sommelier level drinker. Hospitality is a big part of that endeavor; even before the first drop of wine is ever poured.

The winery follows Maya Angelou's philosophy: “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

The following Q&A between the Business Journal and Brown has been edited for clarity and space.

## Why after seven years of not having tastings at your Chiles Valley estate did you resume them this year?

We have a lot of guests who travel to Napa to visit our Brown Downtown Napa tasting room, and a frequently asked question is “What else should we do?” For our 30th anniversary, in summer 2025, we hosted several “member homecoming” gatherings at the estate, and we found that guests who attended those events were also scheduling tastings at Brown Downtown the day before or after. In the current experience economy, being able to provide our Brown enthusiasts with discrete “town and country” opportunities between our own venues is additive all around. And the ranch (as we call it) is a very peaceful place, highly conducive to a nervous system reset, which we all need these days.

## What is Brown Estate doing to keep people interested in wine, especially younger generations?

In 2018 we established our House of Brown sister label, which is both a point of entry for newbies to our brand and/or to the world of wine and an easy access “everyday” offering for our established Brown enthusiasts. Produced out of Lodi in keeping with the same principles of purity, balance and sustainability that are foundational to our mothership/heritage brand, these wines are lighthearted and light on the palate, bringing true something-for-every-palate flavor(s) to our portfolio at \$20 retail. As well, the packaging and brand ethos embrace, embody, and celebrate diversity, which has been a hallmark of the “new consumer” since we got into the business 30 years ago.

## What is it like working in a family-owned business?

Working in a family-owned business is a challenge to begin with — in the wine industry it's magnitudes more so because the nature of this business is wildly complicated. The secret sauce for us is communication. We are a very tight-knit family, and we had the benefit of watching our parents work together in their medical practice, which really provided us with some poignant behavior modeling; not least in the realm of Stick-To-Itiveness, which is paramount in the wine business. We're fortunate that we each have a lane where we excel, so the collaboration process is pretty uncontested in terms of each of our roles. We used to say we felt like we were in a band, each of us playing an instrument, sometimes following written music, sometimes improvising, always harmonizing. We also have very dedicated team members around us on the farming, production, hospitality, and sales sides who make all of our operations possible.

## You have said you were an early adopter of technology. How is tech, and AI in particular, integrated into the winery?

First of all, I should give credit to my whole family, including my mom and my late father, for being technology enthusiasts. Second, it bears mentioning AI is known to have deleterious impacts on the environment, so that does make us think twice about engaging it, which we try not to do for frivolous purposes. We use it on a limited basis for data analysis, forecasting, and some thought partnership. It's a work in progress as far as hype vs. efficacy, but I recognize the importance of keeping up with developments in this realm because for better or worse they're here to stay. That said, one of the most surgical and meaningful applications that comes to mind in our context currently is on the forest management and fire prevention sides where CalFire is using AI to monitor, detect, and control hotspots. We're very grateful for that, who keeps up that good work with his ranch team. In the 45 years since my folks bought the place, we've seen the fires come closer and closer in, and after 2017 and 2020 our vigilance has redoubled twice over. [The winery lost structures in the 2020 Glass Fire.]

## What are your top two concerns about your business or industry?

Climate change and related environmental dynamics are a compounded existential threat to life on this planet. And, likewise, the pervasiveness of disinformation brought to us by technology and so-called social platforms. These issues are much bigger than our industry. I think from an on-the-ground perspective the wine industry is having to think on its feet about how to address a very different set of challenges pertaining to the viability of what we're all doing and how. That means a lot of different things between production and sales. The one constant we don't have to wonder about is hospitality, which is more vital than ever — and more than ever in need of human touch(es). Hospitality will never be taken over by technology/AI/robots — at least not at Brown.

## What is the key to retaining quality employees?

Cohesiveness and synergy at the top. Everything emanates from there, and company culture is crucial. We believe in esprit de corps but it's difficult to achieve if ownership/leadership isn't aligned and energized toward common goals. As well, having a formal HR infrastructure is essential. There are platforms that facilitate those processes, but you also have to have even-keeled HR administrators keeping it all together.

## Which two-character traits do you possess that are most instrumental to your success?

My capacity for self-examination and course-correction. Daily exercises.

## How do politics—local-state-national-international—impact your winery?

At this point the density of material in these areas is so overwhelming. We're working to counteract it all to the extent we can; which goes back to hospitality at the estate as a nervous system reset. We are in the business of fostering joy ... and it's never felt more important.

## What brings you joy that isn't work related?

Fashion and the power of clothes and style as a form of self-expression. It's a source of inspiration, aspirational and transportive — and I also find it instructive from a business standpoint because after all we are purveyors of a luxury product.

## How is your job different from what you dreamed about as a kid?

When I was young I saw my mom ferrying a blue vinyl pouch filled with checks and cash from her business to the bank. I was very inspired watching her manage the business (and her relationship with her business partner, aka dad), and I wanted to be like her. She was commanding in an elegant and gracious way. I'm always trying to capture that essence while navigating all of the complexities I'm still discovering on the job.