

NOTES ON TASTING WITH JAMES MOLESWORTH

Single-Vineyard Cabernets to Watch at Howell Mountain's Outpost

With the help of new owners AXA Millésimes, Frank Dotzler and winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown have turned Outpost into a destination for Napa Cabernet



By

- [James Molesworth](#)

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Frank Dotzler was running his own manufacturing business building desktop computers in the late 1990s when the wine bug bit (understandable, as he was in Tuscany at the time). So he bought a vineyard in 1998 on Napa Valley's Howell Mountain; he named it True. Soon after that, he sold his business and went into wine full-time, buying a second property on Howell Mountain in 2003, which became [Outpost](#).

True Vineyard was the last property that [former Screaming Eagle owner Jean Philips](#) sold in the valley as a real-estate broker, her day job before becoming a Napa cult Cabernet star. Along the way, Dotzler had also met and hired [winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown](#), with whom he now partners in their Mending Wall winery.

The Outpost site sits at a lofty elevation of 2,200 feet and comes with a viticultural history that dates to the 1800s, when it was planted mostly to Zinfandel, Carignane and other grapes. In the 1960s it was purchased by Bruce Lamborn, who tried to nurse the original Zinfandel plantings along. He made a go of it for a while, despite the failing health of the vineyard due to phylloxera. When Dotzler bought it in '03 he was aware he'd have to replant. But he'd already gone through a planting at his first vineyard and had become good friends with some of the folks who helped him break into the wine industry.

Using clonal selections from his friends, Dotzler planted True vineyard in 2002, after four years of dynamiting and ripping the hard, rocky soil to make it suitable for planting vines, as well as drilling a well for water. "If I knew then what I was getting into, things might not have worked out. Knock on wood we found water," he says, tapping his head with a smile.

As True came on line and the replanting at Outpost moved along, the winery initially established a track record for its intense, vivid Zinfandel bottling. But with the winds of Napa shifting steadily to Cabernet Sauvignon, Dotzler charted a course that tacked that way. True vineyard's 9 acres of vines are predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon, along with some Franc and Merlot. Outpost's 19 acres of vines still include a small portion of Zinfandel that has been kept (though replanted) to keep the site's historical link; the rest has shifted to Cabernet Sauvignon (and a drop of Grenache). Today, Outpost totals about 2,500 cases annually of Cabernet, along with 500 cases of Zinfandel and 250 cases of Grenache.

The Cabernets here are clearly mountain in profile—intensely colored, vividly fruited and marked by chiseled, defined structure. But while neighbors such as [Dunn](#) next door and [Robert Craig](#) just down the road are known for their burlier tannic profiles, Outpost's wines show a higher pitch and racier edge. That house style comes from the hand of Brown, who oversees the winemaking, along with in-house winemaker John Giannini.

"When it comes to tannin management, there's viticulture, vinification and aging," says Giannini. "Those are the three touchpoints where we can play a role. And we choose to handle the vinification in a way so that we avoid the bigger tannins that peek out a bit."

All ferments are in stainless steel tanks following a cold soak of five to seven days. Ferments are allowed to start naturally, and from there the preference is for a hotter, faster ferment before pressing off while still slightly sweet.

"We want to avoid the skins and stems sitting in a solution with increasing alcohol," says Dotzler. "That's when you get those tannins that peek out."

From there the wines are aged in all French oak for 20 months, with the final blends made late in their [élevage](#).

Outpost's 2019s are impressive, led by the outstanding **2019 Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain True Vineyard** (official scores and tasting notes for the 2019s are coming soon in [Insider Weekly](#)). It's dark and winy in a true mountain fruit manner, with waves and waves of steeped plum, warmed fig and boysenberry reduction flavors rolling through. It also offers mouthwatering licorice snap, violet and apple wood notes that add range through the finish, which is driven by a strong tarry/mineral underpinning.

The **2019 Cabernet Sauvignon Howell Mountain**, also outstanding, features plum, boysenberry and blackberry compote flavors, supported with a racy graphite underpinning with showier anise, fruitcake and Christmas pudding notes filling in for dramatic effect.

As the wines age, they diverge a bit more, with the **2016 True Vineyard** showcasing a distinctly wet stone/gravelly minerality amid racy fruit while the **2016 Outpost** bottling begins to focus its fruit in a tighter lane, backed by a subtly developing iron hint. In **2014**, the pair showcases the zesty, sweet bay and herbaceous aromas that mark the vintage, with the True Vineyard again marked by a more powerful minerality matched with racy fruit and the Outpost highlighting more intense fruit with a more sedate mineral hint.

In 2018 [Dotzler sold Outpost to AXA Millésimes](#), the French-based insurance company whose wine holdings include Bordeaux second-growth [Château Pichon Baron](#) and [Portugal's Quinta do Noval](#). The deal allowed Dotzler to stay on as general manager while also keeping the winemaking team and other staff in place.

And the brand is growing: AXA acquired a third nearby vineyard site, now named Henry, in March 2021. The 40-acre property sits at 1,900 feet, just between True Vineyard (1,700 feet) and Outpost (2,200). After vinifying fruit from the existing vines in '21, they decided to rip it out and redo it entirely, including changing the row alignment, varietal composition (more Cabernet again) and irrigation.

"That's the great thing about working with AXA and [Christian \[Seely\]](#) (who oversees all the AXA-owned wineries): When you see an opportunity, they make it happen. And they do it with the same idea we have," says Dotzler. "We want to make more wine, but only if it's at or better than what we're already doing."

And in another sign of that commitment to quality, there will be no 2020 releases from Outpost due to the [wildfires at the end of that growing season](#).

As for having to go a year without a wine, Dotzler echoes his mantra, with a smile: "If I knew then what I was getting into ..."

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