Skipstone

Geyserville, California

An obsession with detail may propel this Alexander Valley start-up to the head of the class.

Photo by Brook Drummond

BEN NARASIN

To understand why Skipstone makes excellent Cabernet Sauvignon and Viognier, you might want to look at its olive oil. The oil bottles are etched with an olive-branch pattern; the label background repeats the design, and where the patterns meet, they align perfectly. Minute attention to detail—through hand-application in the case of the olive oil—is why this Alexander Valley winery with Napa Valley aspirations is likely to realize its dreams.

Husband and wife Fahri Diner and Jill Layman bought Skipstone in 2001 after Diner sold his fiberoptic company, Qtera, at age 33. That "retirement" didn't last (he's now a venture capitalist), but his commitment to wine did. Treating his new property like a well-funded start-up, Diner built a small team of dedicated staff, augmented by top-tier consultants. Andrew Levi, previously of Ferrari-Carano and PreVail, is Skipstone's full-time winemaker, while Philippe Melka consults. Ulises Valdez is the firm's vineyard manager, and "Amigo Bob" Cantisano serves as the "organic farming specialist" (the vineyard is Certified California Organic Farmers). There's even an outside tasting panel, including top sommeliers headed by Emily Wines, MS.

With so many talented personalities involved, fear of "too many chefs" is natural, but the wine itself evidences clear leadership. "I believe in people," Diner says. "I surround myself with experts in their respective fields. I trust them, and I judge by results." Levi echoes, "The value Diner finds in any enterprise is in the peo-

Ben Narasin is a freelance food, wine, travel, and lifestyle writer and online television commentator. He focuses on the sybaritic lifestyle and unique life experiences and culinary pairings. He also judges wine competitions. His website is foodwinelife.com.