

**'How do I rate the program?
Well, in the land of the blind,
the one-eyed man is king.'**

The Falcon Crest myth

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The most talked-about Napa Valley winery, in reality, does not exist.

Popularized in weekly television soap opera-like episodes, Falcon Crest Winery, its owners, employees and environs have been fabricated by Hollywood tycoons and scripters.

Initially, CBS producers took bits and pieces of many area settings and pieced them together to create the mythical viticultural kingdom of matriarch Angela Channing and her obstinate nephew, Chase Gioberti.

TV executives eventually settled on a couple of area locales to include in their exteriors and have recreated two elaborate valley homes on the Hollywood soundstage.

The opening segment of the nighttime series shows the Channing limousine crossing the Golden Gate bridge and, then, zooming up a drive to a palatial home.

That long picturesque driveway, framed by a stand of stately trees, actually leads to the old Stags' Leap Manor, currently owned and occupied by vintner Carl Doumani of Stags' Leap winery.

The palatial home purportedly occupied by the acerbic matriarch is, in reality, the digs of winemaker Michael Robbins. And the winery shown in the series is Robbins' adjacent Spring Mountain Winery, although film crews currently trek out to Cucamonga for required cellar shots.

Technicians have recreated a couple of Stags' Leap Manor rooms to serve as living quarters for Gioberti.

About the only filming done anymore in the Napa Valley occurs during the annual visit to shoot exteriors on Spring Mountain.

Robbins enjoys the notoriety the popular television show has brought his wines. In fact, uninvited visitors to his winery and home have prompted him to construct a new visitors' center and schedule as many as four tours per day starting next month.

On the other hand, Doumani wants no visitors to his home and winery. Situated along the eastern foothills, the old Stags' Leap Manor was once a notorious guesthouse for well-heeled city folk. It may one day again house overnight guests. But until it does, Doumani emphatically declares he wants no rubberneckers on his property. He's so adamant about discouraging visitors that he's even reluctant to talk about the part his property played in early "Falcon Crest" filming.

But Robbins reacts in opposite fashion. An excellent businessman, the 59-year-old vintner was sharp enough to insist the creators of the new TV series permit him to bottle wine with the Falcon Crest label. Requests for Falcon Crest wine have been overwhelming.

"It's helped us in a bad marketing era," Robbins says of the show's popularity. "Our sales are up quite a bit."

The Spring Mountain property now owned by Robbins had a good reputation for fine wines even before the turn of the century.

The property's baronial home and nearby barn were designed and built by the same man who designed Beringer's Rhine House. They were constructed in 1885 for Tiburcio Parrott. Parrott and Company owned a brewery, winery, olive oil factory and grew tobacco. The estate was named Miravalle, Spanish for "view of the valley," located several hundred feet above the valley floor.

"There were fabulous wines here before the turn of the century," Robbins notes, strolling along a tree-lined lane leading to his home. "This was one of the greatest (wineries) before Prohibition."

The present winery was designed and built by Robbins himself, a man who doesn't object to getting his hands dirty. This is a guy who earned both law and engineering degrees by going to night school.

He gutted the old mansion on the property, and, with the help of 18 superior craftsmen, restored the spacious steepled home to its 19th century splendor in 18 months.

The mixture of Hollywood and wine first touched Robbins in the late 1950s.

A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Robbins had but a few hundred dollars and a mother to support when he began his civilian career.

In 1959, he went to the movies. "I saw 'This Earth Is Mine' and it changed my life forever. I was really taken by the lifestyle that was shown, coupled with the pride in what they were doing. Getting into the wine business became a consuming passion."

By 1960, it had consumed him — Mike Robbins became a partner in the new Mayacamas Winery.

He founded Spring Mountain Winery in 1968, then sold it — lock, stock and barrel — in 1976. He took his label with him and the former Spring Mountain Winery became St. Clement.

The present Spring Mountain operation encompasses a 258 acre spread, 125 acres planted to grapes. About 85 percent of the grapes used in Spring Mountain wines are grown on Robbins' property.

Robbins is candid about the TV show, "Falcon Crest," produced by Lorimar, creators of another popular nighttime soap, "Dallas," for CBS-TV.

"It's helped us," he says, "but it's doubtful the program is good for the wine industry as a whole."

"I had hoped for a 'Waltons' theme, which our valley is, rather than the 'Dallas' theme, which our valley is not. But that's what sells. Personally, I'm appalled at the constant violence and deceit."

"The show does offer some good acting — but it doesn't represent our valley, or our number one industry."

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Robbins used to be listed in the "Falcon Crest" weekly credits as technical adviser.

He admits the sound stage reproduction of the rooms in his home are fairly accurate. However, he refers to the set decoration as "early brothel."

Robbins was never consulted about ongoing wine-related matters and eventually asked to have his name removed from the show's credits.

"It was embarrassing, really," he says of the program's technical errors. "One can only advise if one is asked."

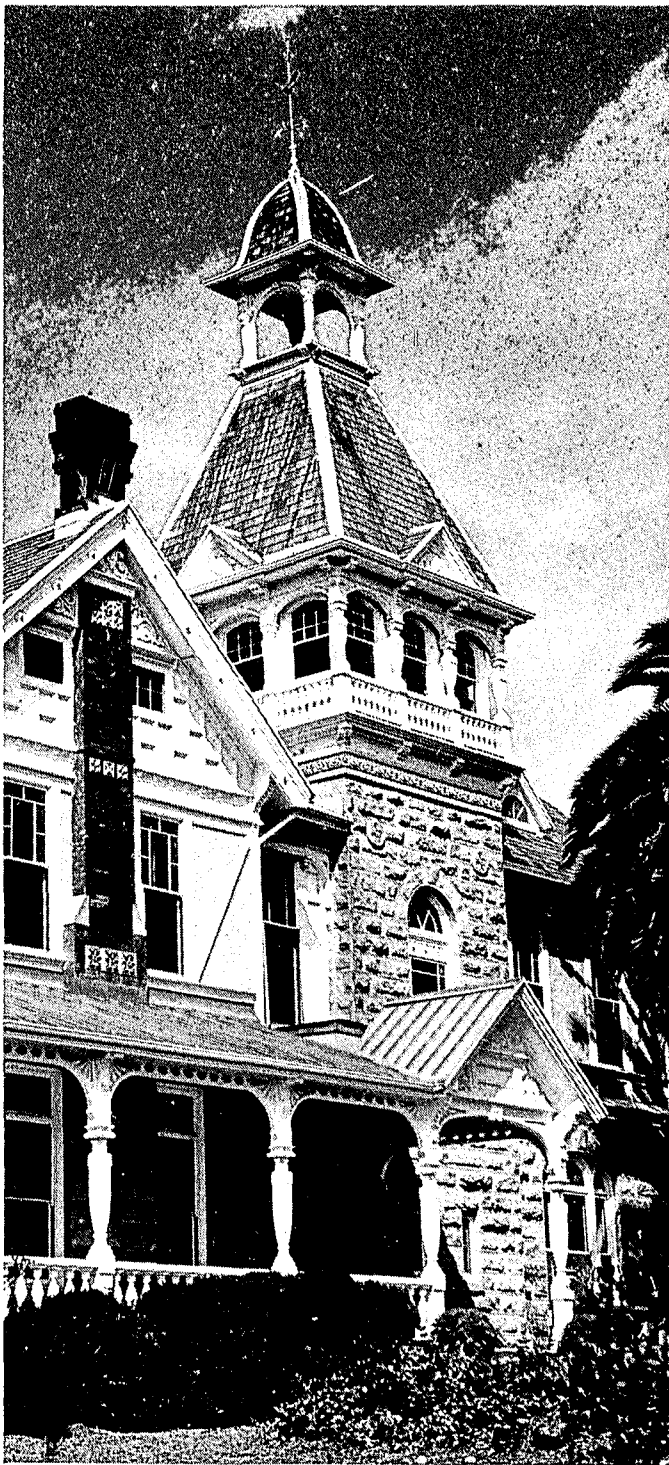
While Robbins feels "Falcon Crest" has helped him market Spring Mountain wines, he also notes it has cost him his privacy.

"I often have people wandering around my house — inside," he quips. "There are fingerprints all over my windows. They wander around here like it's Golden Gate Park."

"That's why we're going to put up gates. I can understand people being curious — but these people are obsessed with it (the TV program)."

The interest in the place where "Falcon Crest" is filmed has prompted Robbins to have a public relations office and visitors center constructed in the spacious winery.

While the winery does not conduct public tastings, it will be open every day for tours. "We're going to start slow



with two tours per day," Robbins adds, "but we could schedule up to four the way things are going. This is an entirely new experience — we've never done this. We've been forced to do this and we've got to get it under control."

Robbins had Napa Valley artist Sebastian Titus produce an oil painting of the Spring Mountain home for the Falcon Crest label.

"People thought I produced that label just to capitalize on the TV exposure," he declares. "Now they found we put out some pretty serious wines under that label."

"We've always blended the cuvees from our various vineyards. The best was bottled under our Spring Mountain label. Whatever was left was put out under a private label for restaurants and the like. Now, we're using Falcon Crest for our second label."

In a blind tasting in Holland recently, Robbins proudly notes that his Spring Mountain cabernets beat out several bordeauxs and the Falcon Crest pinot noir beat out some bottlings of gamay beaujolais.

Speaking about the Falcon Crest bottlings, Robbins believes they appeal to both wine drinkers and aficionados. "But we're also opening up a new market, to people who haven't historically been drinking wine."

The first Falcon Crest bottlings last year consisted of 2,900 cases of chardonnay and 600 cases of pinot noir. Since Robbins felt the Spring Mountain and Falcon Crest chardonnays were of equal quality, they are selling for the same price per bottle, \$14.50. While the pinot noir was available, it sold for \$6.50. In future years, Robbins plans to charge two-thirds of Spring Mountain retail prices for each Falcon Crest bottling.

Falcon Crest is a fictitious winery. But that doesn't bother TV viewers. They know part of that make-believe setting is real and they want to see it, touch it, take part of it home with them. People who have observed rubbernecking visitors at Spring Mountain have referred to them as "Falcon Crest gropies."

While the program is popular in the United States, it's the number one rated show in England. It's seen in 37 foreign countries. "It's been dubbed in Arabic, Chinese, German, French — you name it," Robbins adds.

"You know a Saudi saw this place on TV and now wants to buy it," the affable vintner admits. Countryside gossip has it that Robbins was offered \$15 million for the home and winery. Robbins admits he is taking a long time to think over the proposal.

"It's just crazy what this program's done for us."

Angela Channing, wine empire matriarch on one of TV's most popular series, "Falcon Crest," is coached by director Alex Singer during one of the filming episodes here. She is portrayed by noted actress Jane Wyman. The Falcon Crest empire is actually bits and pieces of existing Napa Valley locales, some of which have been copied on Hollywood sound stages. At top left is vintner Michael Robbins' home, the almost century-old Miravalle, which is Channing's home on the CBS series, while the Spring Mountain Winery, also owned by Robbins, is Falcon Crest Winery on the TV show. The long drive, at left, up to the Channing home is actually a drive leading to the old Stags' Leap Manor along the valley's eastern foothills. Photos by Al Francis.

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