

JOSEPH CELLARS

For love of wine, the Valley, and Calistoga

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

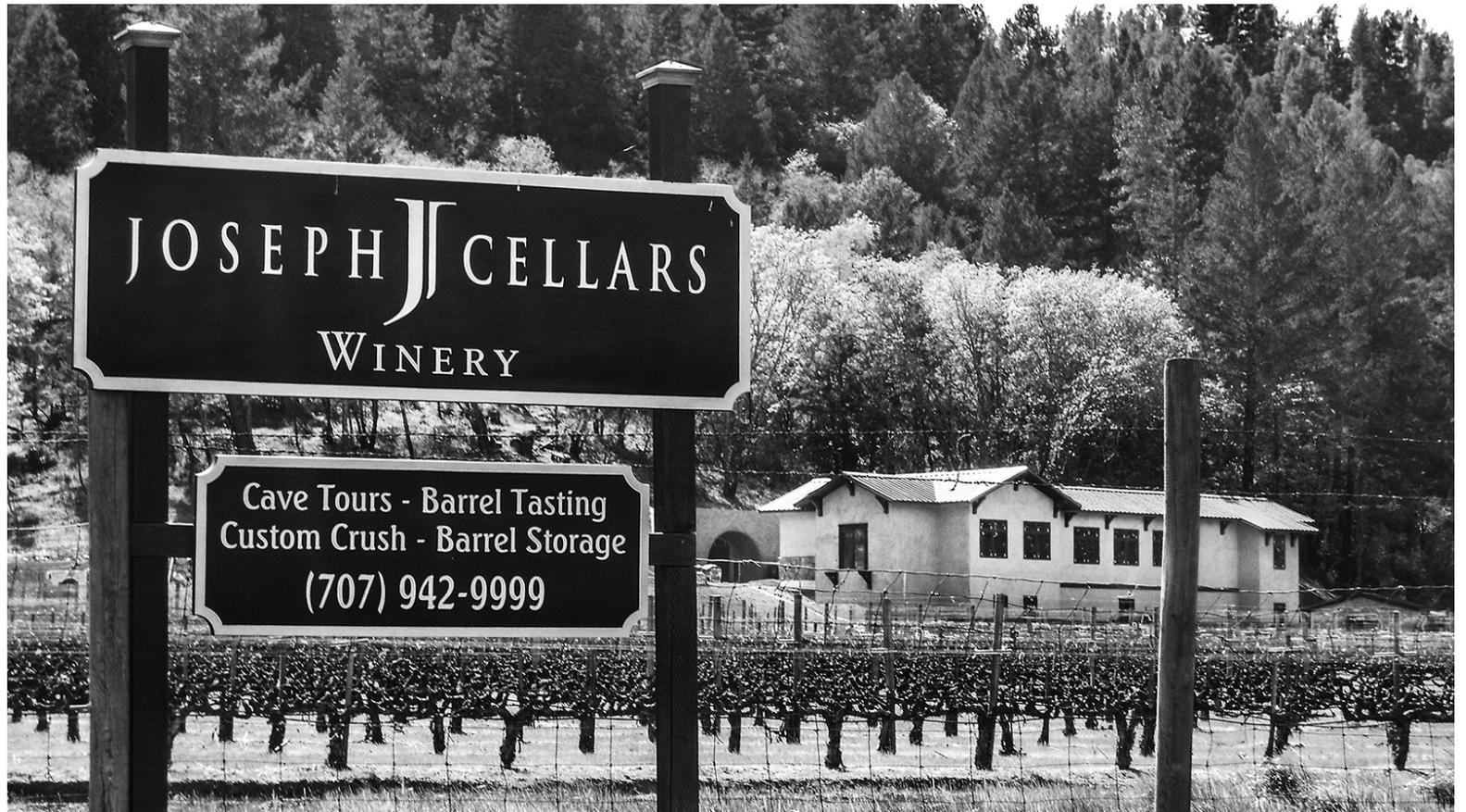
Joe Bartholomew has a strategy for getting his new Calistoga winery off the ground: “I call it pour, pour, pour. You’ve got to let people taste your wine.”

During a recent visit to Joseph Cellars Winery, the conspicuous work in progress off of Highway 29 at the foot of Diamond Mountain, Bartholomew mentioned this approach more than once. A man on an ambitious winemaking and hospitality mission, he’s transforming his and his family’s winery dream into reality, and he wants Joseph Cellars wine in peoples’ glasses. But to make it happen, the seasoned entrepreneur and Florida native has had to remain patient.

“We’ve been coming to the wine country for a long time,” Bartholomew said as he and his general manager, Ace Yaksic, led a tour of the partially completed main building and wine caves that will house winemaking and guest facilities. “You know, you have to wait for the right place and the right time. We were five years just finding this property.”

The path Bartholomew and his wife, Nicole, took to arrive at this picturesque location a few miles south of Calistoga began over a decade ago. They were making frequent vacation trips from Florida to Napa Valley, bringing groups of friends—sometimes ten at a time—to share in their enjoyment of the wine country life. On one of these visits, the idea to put down roots in the valley took hold when Bartholomew met Laurie Wood, the legendary co-founder of Freemark Abbey winery. As the two developed a friendship, Bartholomew became familiar with Freemark and with Wood’s other properties, including one he leased near Calistoga. Bartholomew knew that this might be the place, yet he still had to bide his time.

“Laurie and I talked for years,” he said. “I’d call him every month, or if I was in town—and I was here monthly—I’d go by and



PHOTOS BY TONY POER

Calistoga’s newest winery, Joseph Cellars, a work in progress off Highway 29 at the foot of Diamond Mountain, is the dream of Florida native Joseph and Nicole Bartholomew. Joe (below) bought nine acres of cabernet sauvignon vines in 2008.



visit him. We’d have coffee in the morning. Finally, a couple of years later, Laurie called me and said, ‘Put a price on it, and let’s make it reasonable.’” In a different wine country real estate deal, Bartholomew might have been on his own after the purchase, but Wood assumed a mentor’s role. “Laurie said, ‘Not

only that, I’m going to help you. I’m going to help you with your vineyard management, all the way to introducing you to some winemakers, and I’m going to put my arms around you and get you started.’” Bartholomew laughed, remembering Wood’s exact words: “He said, ‘I’d better help you, because I’m never going to get rid of you.’”

His persistence paid off. In 2008 he completed the purchase of what would become the Bartholomew Family Vineyard, nine acres of ideally situated cabernet sauvignon vines. Like many Napa Valley vineyards, the property started out differently. “It was a walnut orchard before,” he said. “You can see the walnut trees that are just finishing blooming right here along the roadway. It used to be all walnut trees.” Cabernet sauvignon vines replaced the trees in 1989, and Wood’s lease on the vineyard ensured that the fruit went into some of the sought-after Freemark cabernets of the 1990s and 2000s. It’s

a track record that bodes well for the future estate wines to be produced at Joseph Cellars. Now nearly 25 years old, the mature vines have established themselves in the volcanic soil.

The winery’s two-story main building,

though still a busy work site, is taking shape. It’s a well-conceived layout of high-ceilinged hospitality rooms, a commercial kitchen, wine labs, and office suites. There are artisan details both inside and out: hand-applied plaster coats almost every square inch of the exterior surface; and the building is covered by a deep brown-orange corten roof. The overhangs are supported by corbels that were milled on-site and lend a subtle, European mountain architecture look to the building, which is set back but easily seen from Highway 29. Large, rough-hewn wooden doors and antique window frames are propped up against interior walls, awaiting installation. Like the corbels, they were created on-site or else were salvaged from old buildings. “We milled the wood from all the fir that we cut down here on the property,” Bartholomew said. “We have it there in the back. We’re probably going to cut it up and use it for siding, or we’ll make furniture out of it.” Pointing out the extensive use of re-purposed wood, Yaksic added that “the entire flooring we’re using is siding from a 100 year-old mill in Petaluma that was torn down.”

“Portal One” is the main entrance to Joseph Cellars’ impressive wine cave. It’s one of three entrances to the extensive subterranean

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Joseph Cellars hopes to open its doors for visitors in June.

PHOTO BY TONY POER

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portion of the winery. Sloping gently downward, the cave extends hundreds of feet into the hill, with a corresponding drop in temperature to a constant 57 degrees Fahrenheit. Bartholomew plans to welcome the first visitors this June, well before the winery's completion in 2014.

Though the space is expansive enough to store a large inventory of wine in barrels and tanks, Bartholomew's concept for the cave is equal parts function and fun. His and Nicole's experience over the years was that "there was no specific place you could walk... into a cave, see production, and be part of a tasting. And so that was our design here, to make it all-inclusive, from production to wine pairings to actually doing barrel tastings. We'll do blend-

ings here, and we'll have cave tours." Thick bulkheads have been constructed and will be enhanced with rustic stone. These added walls will join doorways that lead to private spaces within the cave, in which Bartholomew plans to welcome groups for lunches, dinners, and tastings. The ramped-up hospitality program will be supported by what Yaksic described as a "full-time chef in a full-blown commercial kitchen."

A junior position might even be carved out for Bartholomew's 15 year-old son, Austin, who, along with little brothers Gage and Jaxon, shadowed us around the property. Austin plans to man the winery's wood-burning pizza oven.

Joseph Cellars may be under construction, but it's more than a startup winery. Working from a custom crush facility, Bartholomew and his respected

winemaker, Kristof Anderson, have already bottled and released several Joseph Cellars wines, including their flagship estate cabernet sauvignon from vintages 2008 through 2010 (see page 9). "Kristof was introduced to me by Laurie Wood," he said. "We're fortunate to have him making our wines. He's a really great winemaker, well respected in the valley, and he makes some very good wine."

Bartholomew and Yaksic described the inaugural 2008 cabernet as "a test vintage" from the vineyard, though, in the bigger scheme of things, the vintage represents a pivotal moment in Bartholomew's decision-making. "The story," he explained, "was that after we'd made the [2008 cabernet] and it was in the barrel, I went to Kristof, and I said,

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"One, the love for California; and two, a love for the town of Calistoga. There's no other place to raise kids than right here in Calistoga, to be honest with you. A love for wine just made this combination a perfect fit." – Joe Bartholomew on why he started the adventure of owning a winery



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‘Kristof, tell me, am I going to make that big investment or aren’t I?’ And he said, ‘Make it!’ And that was based on the ‘08.”

In addition to cabernet, Bartholomew has Rutherford chardonnay and Dry Creek Valley zinfandel to satisfy his “pour-pour-pour” mantra. What’s missing, for now anyway, is the physical space in which to serve the Joseph Cellars wines.

But that hasn’t stopped Yaksic and Bartholomew from reaching out to the Calistoga and larger Napa Valley communities to make new friends with the wines.

“It’s being a part of every event,” he said. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s Christmas time or the Fourth of July. Every event, anything that’s around, we’re involved in, and we’re pouring.”

To access both consumers and the wine trade at this early stage, Joseph Cellars is a member of such high-profile organizations as the Wine Institute, Napa Valley Vintners, and the Calistoga Chamber of Commerce.

Perhaps most fitting, the winery is also part of the Calistoga AVA, Napa Valley’s newest viticultural area whose creation in 2010 came on the heels of Bartholomew founding his winery. He pointed out that Joseph Cellars actually “sits on two AVAs: it’s in the Diamond Mountain AVA and it sits now on Calistoga’s.”

When asked what he thought about being part of the long-delayed Calistoga appellation, he replied, “We knew that it was in the works. It wasn’t something that



PHOTO BY TONY POER

Hillside caves will keep Joseph Cellars wines at a constant 57° F.

was make-or-break. If it didn’t become an AVA, you know, we weren’t going to back out of any deal or not build the building or the winery. We’ve got 10 acres on the valley floor that produce great grapes, and now that they happen to fall into the Calistoga AVA, that makes us even happier.”

“The AVA is young,” he added, “and they’re trying to get it off the ground. But as they’re doing events and other things, we’re participating.” This included a well-attended February tasting at nearby Clos Pegase Winery, part of the Napa Valley Vintners’ annual Premiere Napa Valley tasting and auction.

“People were very excited,” Yaksic said about the tasting. “It makes a big statement to get people up-valley to taste Calistoga wines. There were probably 300 people, with 20 wineries pouring and ten restaurants. It was a great event.”

Starting with the 2013 vintage, Joseph Cellars will carry the Calistoga AVA on the labels of their estate red wines.

Bartholomew plans to continue with Rutherford chardonnay, add a sparkling wine made from the same fruit, and has sourced old-vine zinfandel in the 2012 vintage from a neighboring property. A ’12 Yountville sauvignon blanc is also on deck for release.

When production moves to the estate, its hillside location and sloping design will allow for an entirely gravity-fed system of winemaking.

Fermentations will take place in a combination of oak, steel tanks, and concrete “pyramids” built in Burgundy, France by Marc Nomblot.

In the meantime, Kristof Anderson is steering the winemaking and has been an integral part of Bartholomew’s vision since that debut ’08 vintage of cabernet.

“I’m excited to work with fruit from the Calistoga AVA,” said Anderson. “While the daytime temperatures do get a little warmer than down valley, we still get the great cooling effect of the bay by late afternoon. This temperature swing is a hallmark of the great wine growing regions of the world.”

Asked about his role at the winery, he gave a thoughtful answer. “From the design of the cellar and caves, to the wines themselves, I’m always striving for balance. So, as winemaker, my goal has been to create wines with structure and great flavors. Once complete, the cave and winery will interact respectfully with our existing vineyards and the nature surrounding us.”

“You’ll see the building doesn’t directly face the highway but follows the contour of the hill,” Bartholomew said, echoing Anderson’s comment as he pointed out the winery’s careful footprint. It’s taken patience and planning to get to this point.

“We haven’t rushed anything,” Bartholomew said. “We’ve taken our time on this project. And by taking your time, you’re able to pick up pieces that might sometimes be overlooked, the small details, and say, ‘Let’s make that change for the best.’”

Asked to reflect on what got Nicole and him to this place in their lives, Bartholomew answered, “One, the love for California; and two, a love for the town of Calistoga. There’s no other place to raise kids than right here in Calistoga, to be honest with you. A love for wine just made this combination a perfect fit.”

TONY POER'S TASTING NOTES Joseph Cellars

2008 Estate cabernet sauvignon, NV
The debut estate cabernet opens gamey and earthy, then develops more luscious, red-black cherry fruit with air. Smooth tannins and very rich fruit.
175 cases. \$95

2009 Estate cabernet sauvignon, NV
A big, classic, full-bodied cabernet, this one needs decanting and patience. Cigar box and graphite nose, spiced black fruit, hints of game meat, with medium-ripe tannins and a chewy texture. A wine to cellar.
1500 cases. \$75

2010 Estate cabernet sauvignon, NV
A juicier and riper cabernet than the ’09 but with similar cigar box nose and spicy flavors. Tannins are more integrated, with a little more ripe fruit through the finish.
1000 cases. \$75

2010 cabernet sauvignon blend “Cellar Select,” Napa Valley
This blend has Bordeaux-like minerality out of the bottle, with soft tannins and nice fruit-earth complexity. Blackberries, red and Bing cherry fruit, balancing acidity. A great food wine.
500 cases. \$50

2009 Old-Vine zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley
Joseph Cellars only Sonoma County wine to date, made in the brambly, old-school zinfandel style. Raspberry and wild berries, black cherry, juicy tannins, and cooking spice through the finish. A nice counterpoint to their cabernets.
300 cases. \$35

2010 chardonnay, Napa Valley
A classic California chardonnay, with ripe figs and apple, caramel notes, and hints of butter from partial malolactic fermentation. But shows restraint, minerality, and nice concentration. Should improve in the bottle.
200 cases. \$29

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