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Rivers-Marie: a partnership in life, wines, and children

By Tony Poer

MUD CITY WEEKENDER

He leads trusted crews at three Napa Valley wineries and consults for several others, from Rutherford to Angwin, St. Helena to Yountville, Tubbs Lane to Beckstoffer-To Kalon. He presides from afar over a historic Pinot Noir vineyard near the fog-lined edge of the Sonoma Coast and closer to home over vines planted in a half dozen of California's best sites for Cabernet Sauvignon. At the end of each day, he returns to a quaint corner of the valley that he says reminds him more than a little of his own southern hometown.

For Calistoga's citizen winemaker Thomas Brown, it's just another day at the office.

The South Carolina native is a miles-logging, cell phone-wielding, mobile force of viticulture. In confident and determinedly benign fashion, he controls a North Coast wine empire.

The actual office is a cottage on a quiet, tree-shaded street in town, while the production hub of his thriving business is Tamber Bey Vineyards on Tubbs Lane. The 43 year-old recently chatted with the *Mud City Weekender* at the new facility, which he helped design and build in 2013.

"A lot of these guys have come up through the system," Thomas said with a subtle, southern drawl that two decades in California haven't diminished. He was discussing the people in the network of wineries to which he applies his talents. "There's a team here, there's a team at Outpost, and a team at Mending Wall that have all sort of developed. Everyone gets along really well. Those are the three places where the majority of the wines I make are made."

"[The wineries] have all been built kind of in the same way, team-wise, and the nice thing about us expanding facilities a bit



PHOTO BY PAT HAMPTON

Thomas Rivers Brown and Genevieve Welsh are partners in life and business, producing extraordinary pinot noir under the Rivers-Marie label. They have two children and are active in the community as well as the world of winemaking.

is that I've been able to hold onto a lot of folks I really like."

"The story of us, it's been neat to watch it grow and build," added Thomas' wife, Genevieve Welsh, who joined in the conversation. "Starting with one of our dear friends who's still at Outpost, stealing Andy from Solage, where he was working in the restaurant field, and then watching Thomas have this network of people."

Then she laughed, as she does often and easily. "They do fun stuff. They're always eating together, and hiking and biking. I have to say, it's pretty darn fun."

A Calistoga resident for most

of her life (and, like Thomas, a former Calistoga Citizen of the Year), Genevieve is a partner with her husband in their own successful wine brand, Rivers-Marie, and is a close observer of his dynamic, teamwork-oriented operation.

"I basically have to hire people to have friends," Thomas deadpanned back at his wife's comment. "So it's worked out well, in that sense. I mean, if someone was working for me, what, are they not going to be my friend? It's a bad idea."

The "Andy" Genevieve mentioned is Andy Jones, assistant winemaker at Tamber Bey and, presumably, Thomas' friend.

Jones is for certain one of the key players on his team, overseeing all winemaking operations at Jennifer and Barry Waitte's stately facility. He worked quietly at his computer across the room while Genevieve and her husband were interviewed, a different scene than the hustle of the restaurant world from which his boss snatched him in 2008. He would later describe Thomas via email as "not only a great leader, but an amazing mentor."

"It's a good group of guys," Thomas said. "That's the fun part: guys that are smart and can work hard. Like, we got Andy out of the restaurant business, John [Gi-

annini, the assistant winemaker at Outpost Wines in Angwin] was back-of-the-house restaurant business. Those guys can direct people, be on their feet for a long time, and still have fun. That's the nice part. So it's been a cool community."

At this point in 2015, Thomas Brown might need a biographer, not a newspaper, to fully describe the trajectory of his career since 1996, when, newly arrived from Richmond, Virginia, he was "sleeping in a friend's closet" in Oakland. That said, he spent

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Rivers-Marie

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his first 18 years in the city of Sumter, South Carolina, about an hour east of the state capital of Columbia. He went to college at the University of Virginia, where he majored in economics and English. A college girlfriend's father's wine collecting habit got him interested in the beverage, but it took a cross-country move for wine to grab hold of his imagination. Landing in the East Bay, he was close enough to Napa Valley to investigate the business in person. Thomas' first industry positions were at the All Seasons wine shop in Calistoga and a harvest stint at Kent Rasmussen's winery in St. Helena. "It took me a couple years to kind of get my feet fully on the ground in Napa," he said, but the All Seasons job was pivotal.

"At All Seasons I got to know Ehren Jordan, who was the winemaker at Turley. He'd taken over from Helen Turley after she left. Through the wine shop and through tastings, Ehren mentioned that he might have a position available, his first cellar position at Turley. I sent my resumé in and eventually was hired by Ehren and Larry [Turley]. That was December of '97. So that's sort of where it all began...It's where I cut my teeth, for sure."

Thomas worked for four years under Jordan at Turley Wine Cellars. As he described it, "There was kind of the French-intensive model. Like in the spring, you'd spend most of the time working in the vineyards. And in the summer and fall, we'd spend time in the cellar. The wines didn't get



PHOTO BY PAT HAMPTON

Thomas helps his daughter Hazel make glitter wands on the back porch of their Calistoga home.

ignored in the spring, but there was plenty of vineyard experience that came out of that. Really, when you break out on your own, picking decisions are arguably the hardest part. And I won't say I knew what to do, but having that vineyard experience helped."

The St. Helena winery enjoyed a meteoric rise in popularity during that time as its single-vineyard Zinfandels, sourced from old-vine properties up and down the state, became sought-after by consumers and restaurants alike. Jordan had been running his own successful consulting company on the side, but when he signed an exclusive contract with Turley, he stopped working with Chiarello Vineyards in Yountville and with Outpost Wines. He was impressed enough by Thomas' skills to recommend his assistant as a replacement.

"So I took those over," said

Thomas, "and then a few projects followed soon thereafter that are still current, like Schrader, for instance, which started in 2000. Then it sort of went from there. I left Turley in February of '01 to just consult...and slowly added projects along the way."

For his part, Ehren Jordan is full of praise and also thoughtful about Thomas' success. Today, he's the co-proprietor along with his wife, Anne-Marie, of Failla Winery in St. Helena, which they started as a wine label in 1998. He was brought on as Turley's winemaker in the mid-90s, only a couple years before he and Larry Turley hired Thomas. Reached on the phone, he suggested that "many people have opportunities that they don't even notice."

"[Thomas] is a smart guy who's good at describing a vision," Jordan continued, "and I think he hit a time in the wine industry where it was beginning to be acceptable to have people who weren't trained enologists. You know, if you look at the arc of Cabernet production, he was able to...really create a niche in some ways, through his skill, through his being in the right place at the right time, cultivating the right friends and people."

"I've had a lot of assistants over the years. You can sort of tell rather rapidly what maybe their career arc is going to be. It was obvious pretty quickly that he's a smart cat and was going to go far."

Thomas has indeed gone very far since his Turley days, though he and Genevieve look back



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The couple met in 1999 while she was working for Forni-Brown-Welsh, her father Barney's produce business in Calistoga. Genevieve grew up three blocks from where she and Thomas now live

fondly at that time. The couple met in 1999 while she was working for Forni-Brown-Welsh, her father Barney's produce business in Calistoga. Genevieve grew up three blocks from where she and Thomas now live, with a gnarled, head-trained Zinfandel vineyard in her family's backyard. While the wine it produced was never very good, she described it rather poetically: "It was beautiful, it was diseased, and it was reds and golds, and every fall we just thought it was fantastic."

Her husband-to-be would eventually woo her away from backyard Zinfandel shiners with fine, white Burgundy, to this day one of their favorite wines and a reference point for their own Chardonnay. As she put it, she "never looked back."

"I already had a pretty massive crush on him," she confessed. "I said, 'Well, first of all, I'll show you what house you should buy, and it should be in Calistoga. And he did, which was great. It was his stretch purchase, and then I had to kind of stalk it for a while before I got myself into it!'"

She reflected further. "I've thought about this: in watch-

ing restaurants throughout my lifetime, and being at restaurant back doors, it was such an amazing era. There were tons of young people in the valley. The kitchens were full of young people, Thomas was with a hot, up-and-coming winemaker, doing it the way that you should, which is all hands-on in the vineyard. So it was just, you know, timing. No matter how amazing you are, timing is so incredibly important."

The high-profile of trio of winery clients—Chiarello, Outpost, and Schrader—came along at the perfect time and put his consulting services at center stage. Fred Schrader's Calistoga label, Schrader Cellars, gained particular attention in the national wine press over Thomas' streak of successful 2000s vintages. Their pricey Oakville Cabernets Sauvignons, made mostly from the famous Beckstoffer-To Kalon Vineyard, garnered high critical ratings and continue to do so, ensuring that the wines will hover in Napa Valley's cult Cabernet stratosphere.

Somewhat closer to earth are the Calistoga AVA Cabernets he makes for Napa Valley philan-

thropists Rick and Elaine Jones. The Jones Family Vineyards

estate, which sits high on a steep hillside east of town, is meticulously farmed and is one of his favorite client properties.

"This harvest might be their 20th, actually," he said. "It's all estate fruit. There are two bottlings from them: the estate bottling and 'The Sisters,' and they both come from the property in Calistoga. They're great folks. It's been a pleasure working with those guys. It's always quality first."

Rick Jones bought the property in 1992, a year after it had been planted. Heidi Barrett was his original winemaker, then Thomas took over for her in 2008. Jones' son-in-law, Dan Bailey, is a lawyer-turned-French wine importer and also serves as the Jones Family sales manager. In that capacity, he is keenly aware of a winemaker's multiple roles. Bailey echoed in a phone call the French model of Thomas' experience at Turley.

"I haven't seen Thomas on top of a tractor before," he said with a laugh, "the way a lot of Burgundian vigneron will be, you know, if it's February. But basically, that's it. They're amongst their vines, they're in their caves, they're wherever they need to be in all aspects of producing the wine, and that's the way I think of how Thomas handles our wine."

"He wants to make sure that we're doing everything right in the winery and in the vineyard. I think of him more as a vigneron, as opposed to a winemaker. He's someone who's involved in all aspects of producing Jones Family wine."

In addition to Jones and his other clients, Thomas has direct winemaking responsibility at St. Helena's Revana Family Vineyards and a consulting agreement with Round Pond Estate in Rutherford. While these types of arrangements account for the majority of wine produced under his direction, he devotes a lot of creative energy to Rivers-Marie, his and Genevieve's proprietary label.

"I'd say it's probably half of our winemaking identity. The other half is definitely the consulting. There's a lot of folks on the consulting side who've done really well Parker and Spectator and all those other guys, and that certainly helps fuel Rivers-Marie."

In simple fashion, Thomas and Genevieve joined their respective middle names together to title the Rivers-Marie project. They launched the brand with the 2002 vintage after sourcing a

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RIVERS-MARIE

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small amount of Pinot Noir from Summa Vineyard in the Sonoma Coast town of Occidental.

The five-acre vineyard, planted in 1978, is one of California's premier sites for cool-climate Pinot Noir and was already renowned in collectors' circles through bottlings by wineries like Williams Selyem and Brogan Cellars. For the couple, kicking off a wine brand with grapes from a vineyard of Summa's provenance was probably like taking a vintage Ferrari out for a test drive: it was fun, but they really wanted to own it.

"Thomas and I always said we would definitely be the first in line to want to purchase it," Genevieve said.

As with Schrader Cellars and the To Kalon Vineyard fruit—except in smaller quantities—Thomas produced a series of attention-grabbing wines from Summa starting with that '02 vintage. In 2010, he and Genevieve had an opportunity to acquire the vineyard from its original owners, Scott and Joan Zeller, though the asking price was hefty. Thomas acknowledged that, at the time, "the [Rivers-Marie] label would continue, but it would have taken a blow if we'd lost Summa." But he noted that "the price was so high, no one else stepped up, either."

"Then the Zellers came back to us, and the price came down. There was some creative financing involved, and we were able to slide in there and grab it. So, the best thing we could have done was buy that vineyard, but it came pretty close to not happening."

In a healthy vintage like 2012, according to Thomas, Summa Vineyard will still only yield about eight tons of grapes. They maxed out that year with a whopping 300 cases, a bit of over-achievement considering they've made as little as 54 bottles from the vineyard, which happened in 2005. "It's not a seller's type of vineyard at all," he said. "We make whatever comes off of it. We're happy to get it. There's rarely much."

Summa is the jewel in the couple's Pinot Noir crown. They've grown *Rivers-Marie* over the



COURTESY PHOTO FROM REVANA WINERY

Thomas Rivers Brown went to college at the University of Virginia, where he majored in economics and English. A college girlfriend's father's wine collecting habit got him interested in wine.

past decade through other Pinot contracts on the Sonoma Coast, along with Chardonnay from the acclaimed B. Theriot Vineyard, next door to Summa. Cabernet Sauvignon soon followed Chardonnay to round out the big three varieties in the *Rivers-Marie* lineup (see sidebar).

"The Cabernet project really got legs in '08," Thomas said. "We signed on with two different vineyards: Panek in St. Helena, which is very near Aida Vineyard; and then Corona in Oakville, which is up above Harlan and Futo, kind of in that range. Even in '08 we didn't quite have the faith to bottle them separately, so we put them together and made by far the best Napa Valley appellation wine we've ever made."

"We've worked hard to develop it. I mean, it's sort of in our wheelhouse to do more Cabernet, so we've paid a lot more attention to that. With Pinot we've sort of just slowly refined the lineup."

Thomas and Genevieve can and do command fairly high prices for the *Rivers-Marie* wines, but they also go out of their way to offer friendly pricing on the Pinot Noir. Paul Walker is a Napa-based online auctioneer and a cool-climate Pinot enthusiast. He wrote via email that "it's nearly impossible to find a Sonoma Coast-designated Pinot Noir for under \$30, but Thomas Brown has managed to make a seriously delicious wine at this price point for a decade."

Over the last few years, Los Angeles restaurateur Caroline Styne has become a loyal supporter of the brand. As wine director and co-owner with Chef Suzanne Goin of a group of very

successful restaurants, including Lucques and AOC Wine Bar, Styne takes whatever *Rivers-Marie* wine she's allocated by her Southern California broker, typically several cases a year. She first visited Thomas' Calistoga office on a trip to the valley five years ago and worked her way through the lineup with one of his assistants.

"I was just really blown away," she recalled over the phone. "I thought the wines were elegant and delicious. You know, they're powerful, too. I think they're a really interesting expression of the Pinots of Sonoma, and I actually find it rare to find anybody who can make fantastic Pinot and Cabernet. They usually don't seem to be together in that role."

"I started buying them immediately," Styne added. "My staff loves them, so they're thrilled to sell them. I think they work really nicely with Suzanne's food, because her food has a lot of acidity, a lot of layers and textures, and it seems to really mirror what's happening in all those wines."

Back at Tamber Bey, Thomas and Genevieve addressed what is coming next. They have two young children, a complex combination of wine businesses, and many past, present, and future volunteer commitments in Calistoga. Were there any other *Rivers-Maries* in the works? They nodded to each other at the question as Thomas described an impending project: Heart's Needle, named for a W.D. Snodgrass poem he's very fond of, will be a new wine brand. It's not a "second label" to *Rivers-Marie*, but instead a complementary label

that he said will capture "some additional opportunities, not only in the world of Pinot Noir but also in the world of maybe alternative varieties, just to explore some different areas and also have a little more fun." Napa Valley sommeliers, take note: there's a Heart's Needle old-vine, bone-dry Mendocino Riesling in your future.

"There's plenty of demand for *Rivers-Marie*," Thomas said, "and we feel mildly oversubscribed for what we're making, so why not reach out?"

Genevieve seemed on board with this plan but brought the conversation back to what might be their favorite wine subject, California Pinot Noir.

"My part of the story is that we are lucky enough that we love life, and we are food people, and we are drink people, so I think for us, it's neat that what's built into it is that, yes, it's an ultimate goal at all times to have as many people exposed to delicious Pinot Noir as possible."

Rivers-Marie tasting notes

by Tony Poer

Thomas Brown and his wife, Genevieve Welsh, released the first wine under the *Rivers-Marie* label with the 2002 vintage from Summa Vineyard. Eleven vintages later, they're still producing layered, complex Pinot Noir from this small vineyard in Occidental on the far west Sonoma Coast and have owned the property since 2010. A few years after the first Pinot release, they added Chardonnay from a vineyard neighboring Summa and, subsequently, a Cabernet Sauvignon sourced from the historic Larkmead property in their hometown AVA of Calistoga.



The *Rivers-Marie* wines below, tasted over two days, display an enormous range of aromas, rich and complex flavors, and cellar potential, including the Chardonnay, which Thomas produces in the Burgundy style to no doubt make his customers (and his wife) happy. The wines do not disappoint.

2013 Rivers-Marie Chardonnay, B. Theriot Vineyard, Sonoma Coast

Smoke, roasted nuts, subtle mineral notes, toast, sweet spice: vanilla and a little cinnamon.

Youthfully dense Chardonnay, really concentrated and long, baked citrus, golden apple, caramel, almond, hazelnut, balance of great richness and mineral-acidity. Firm thread of acidity throughout. Restrained opulence, strong traces of Burgundy here.

\$50

2013 Rivers-Marie Pinot Noir, Summa Vineyard, Sonoma Coast

Cherry/baked plum aromas, roasted pepper, cracked pepper, meaty, gamey, dried red/black fruit, mineral, a little saline. Red plum, red and black cherry, grilled herbs, orange rind, medium tannins, really exotic and spicy. Medium-bodied, very firm, very rich fruit, complex and incredibly long on palate. Emblematic Sonoma Coast pinot noir.

\$50

2013 Rivers-Marie Cabernet Sauvignon, Calistoga

Bright fruit notes, cherry-blackberry, citrus peel, wild berry, mineral, touch of graphite, cedar. Stone fruit, plum, black cherry, vanilla, sweet and integrated oak, approachable but still quite firm. Needs a full day to really open up. Great cellar potential but a light touch for this warm AVA

\$90