

## WINE TALK

# The Two Gentlemen Behind Napa's Gentleman Farmer

Joe Wolosz and Jeff Durham started their winery because they love hospitality, whether it's cooking, running a hotel or sharing their wines



Joe Wolosz, left, and Jeff Durham started their Napa winery with a vision of offering great wines made to pair with meals. (Courtesy Gentleman Farmer)

**By MaryAnn Worobiec**

Vintners Joe Wolosz and Jeff Durham founded Gentleman Farmer in 2005, making just 80 cases that vintage. Today they make about 1,000 cases of Napa Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay annually, with help from winemaking consultant Jérôme Chéry. Most of the grapes they purchase are from the Oak Knoll region of Napa Valley.

Describing their approach to wine, Wolosz explains that he sees wines as variation on a theme, depending on their region. He uses the song "My Favorite Things" to describe this point. "We know the song from *The Sound of Music*, but John Coltrane's version is actually what made it super cool and famous for me." He adds that Bordeaux might be more like the Julie Andrews version. "But we have John

that Bordeaux might be more like the Julie Andrews version. "But we have John Coltrane here in Napa. We grow Bordeaux grapes in Napa sun. We appreciate the Coltrane song, because we know the Julie Andrews tune."

Wolosz and Durham have a history in hospitality, and they currently own and operate The Redwood Fortuna Riverwalk Hotel in Humboldt County. Their wines are made specifically to be enjoyed with food. With their hospitality bent, private lunches with visitors and wine club members are evolving. Before the end of the year, they plan to open The Bungalow, a tasting room and dining space in downtown Napa.

Speaking with senior editor MaryAnn Worobiec, the married couple describes their journey into wine, their thoughts on hospitality, and what it's like to represent the LGBTQ+ community in wine.

**Wine Spectator:** Tell me how wine entered your lives.

**Joe Wolosz:** I like to tell people I got into the cellar through the back door of the kitchen. I was in a cooking program in the early 1990s when I got my first winery job with Talley vineyards in Arroyo Grande—that's where I'm from.

I just fell in love with wine and food. I was a hotel restaurant major—as was Jeff. I was working in kitchens after college. My parents had a burger shack in Pismo Beach. I worked there. I was working 16-hour days.

I got involved in the hotel side of the industry in the mid '90s. I bought a little hotel for myself in 1998 and then started selling hotels, brokering hotels. In the 2000s, I realized I was so far away from what I wanted to do with my life.

**Jeff Durham:** I was born and raised in Napa. My dad was a contractor and a fireman. He found 22 acres on Big Ranch Road right off of El Centro, a house and 20 acres of pastureland. So my dad and my grandfather planted that all with Gewürztraminer and Sauvignon Blanc. My brother and I were in those vineyards every single day after school and on the holidays. We absolutely hated it. My parents sold when I went to college.

When Joe and I were lucky enough to meet in '99, we were in the city. Joe got me into hotel brokerage as well. I think that you have to have a wine project when you move to Napa. So through a friend of a friend of a friend, we found someone who was looking for a partner and started up the wine project.

**JW:** When we had a partner, it was death by committee on everything, from the name to the label, to the logo to the look, everything.

My brother had passed away in 1999 from leukemia. My sister passed away in 2016. My mom passed away in 2017. And my dad went to assisted memory care. I'm like, last man standing, turning 50, and we were getting married. With the help of a therapist, I realized that I don't want to be 90 years old and wonder what if I really did it? So I went to our partner and just said, I'm buying you out. I just wanted the name "Gentleman Farmer." Everything else is up for grabs.

I got more involved with winemaking. I finished my winemaker's certificate at U.C. Davis. There is a new look, new logo, new label, new fruit sources. I stopped doing anything else. I let my real estate license expire. I get to do what I love every day and I tell people my life is a vacation now.

**WS:** What did you both want to be when you grew up?

**JW:** My parents didn't drink wine, but when I got the job at a winery, I was bringing home open bottles and mom would make spaghetti. She was a great cook. We started drinking wine because of that, and my family kind of got into it at that point, but I wanted to be a chef. I always knew I wanted to cook.

**JD:** At 15 and a half I got a job at Mamma Nina's in Yountville and never looked back. I didn't want to cash my first check—it was probably \$22 and I was like, 'I'm rich! This is the best industry ever'.

One college [I looked at] had hospitality management, which caught my eye. At that time, I got a job at a big hotel in Napa. I did everything—room service, work the bar, host and day server. I thought this is the best thing. My first job out of college was with the Four Seasons. I came back to San Francisco and worked for the Clift Hotel.

And here we are, all these years later. We own a hotel, we have the winery, everything we do is based in that hospitality. So it's neat that it still is all part of that aspect.

**JW:** There's a lot of people that made money in another industry and came into the valley and decided to make wine. We are not that story. We bootstrapped this. We keep bootstrapping. We're going through the process of constant little remodels here and there to make it work, rather than do it all at once. It's just feels like it's finally all coming together. We sold our watches to buy grapes in 2010.

**WS:** How did you meet?

**JD:** A gay bar in the Castro.

**JW:** April 10. A Sunday. Two in the afternoon and a beautiful sunny day, like 70 degrees.

**JD:** I was with my best friend who went to college with him. Joey was at the bar, and Mike went up to say hello to him. Within 10 minutes, a gaggle of like eight gays walked in. They all knew Joey and my friend, so we got sucked into the group. He took me to Midnight Sun to hunt for onion rings, and the rest is history.

**WS:** When did you guys get married?

**JW:** Jeff turned 50 Dec. 5, 2016. And I was turning 50 on June 27, 2017. And the 50/50 split between our two birthdays is March 18. So we got married on our 50/50 birthday. My last name is Wolosz, his last name is Durham. We had a big sign that said, "WD 50."

**JD:** The beauty of getting married when you're 50 is you get to invite the people you want. We had it at a community center. We invited 130 people and I think 225 showed up. All we did was a giant bar and we turned it into a giant cocktail reception for at least eight hours. Our good friend who is a stand-up comedian was our officiant and she was on fire.

**WS:** A lot of people are interested in wine, but most don't take the leap into actually owning something.

**JW:** Both of my parents were entrepreneurs. I think I was expected to do that. I love to cook. So the winery is about cooking. I get to cook every day now because when I do a tasting, it's not a tasting. I do a lunch because I'd rather have the wine paired with food. So it's just that idea of creating your own little universe.

**WS:** Were there any steep learning curves that you had once you started The Gentleman Farmer?

**JW:** The accounting threw me for a loop. Coming from other industries, I thought, I'm buying grapes, these are expenses. But they're not expenses until the grapes actually get into a bottle and get to market. So in a cycle of three years, money is going out the window, and it is contributing to inventory. I don't have the money to pay the taxes on the money that I just spent on grapes. That was a steep learning curve.

**WS:** How about you, Jeff? Was there anything that was harder than you thought it would be?

**JD:** What was so interesting—and I think this speaks to his wine experience, too—is it's all hands on. You can do book learning, which is great. But the thing with both of our industries—the hotel and the wine—it's all hands on. What I love about this industry is the opportunities to be able to not just come from book learning, but to come from that day-to-day experience.

**JW:** He talks about that hands-on, and I think that's another reason why we like doing what we're doing. It's not blue-collar work. It's not white-collar work. This is a trade. Winemaking or running the hotel is a trade. You have to get your hands dirty.

When you're in a cellar or when you're sorting fruit or whatever you're doing—you are in there touching and making things. Just like cooking is for me.

**WS:** How did you come up with the name "Gentleman Farmer"?

**JW:** At one point it was Poem Cellars because "Wine is bottled poetry." I went to trademark it, but another company owns the trademark. My business cards had "Gentleman Farmer" as my title. When Poem fell through, we agreed on Gentleman Farmer. A gentleman's farm is for his satisfaction and his pleasure, not for profit. We are definitely not profit hunting. But this is what satisfies us, this is what brings us pleasure in doing this every day.

**JD:** It speaks exactly to what we want to do with it, and what we want to be.

**WS:** There are few gay-owned wineries in Napa. How has community acceptance been?

**JD:** Napa is a conservative county. It is agriculture. It's dominated by white men. It's been very, very interesting.

**JW:** Things have changed so much since 2005. When we started, I didn't want to be the rainbow wine. I didn't want to use that as a marketing tool. The wine is serious to me, you know. It's not about a marketing angle. It's about what's in the bottle.

Now—you're going to laugh—I actually got certified as gay. There's a certification process through the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. You have to apply and they will certify you as gay, but you have to give them a lot of information, a lot of documents, marriage license, all that. Then there's a 45-minute interview, and there are references from your friends and all this stuff.

**JW:** They were looking for references from our favorite bartenders in the Castro. That should be enough.

**JD:** So I got certified in June 2021. It was a lot of work. Joey, would you say it's worth it?

**JW:** What happens is that companies like Hyatt, Marriott, American Airlines have in their program that something like 10 percent of their expenses need to be paid to vendors from diversity. So they will contact the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce and say, 'We need gay wine.' So they'll give you the list of who's certified and then they can connect you.

It's weird how it's worked out. We did an LGBTQ affinity group virtual tasting for a big hedge fund, and other stuff came through because of it. It seems like all of a sudden in 2022, it's a blessing. We're not marketing it as that, but we're not shying away from who we are.

**JD:** He doesn't share it but he has had lesbians and gay people come to him and say, "I want to get into the business. What should I be doing?" It's exciting to have them over to our house, have a little lunch with them, and talk to them about opportunities.

**JW:** Yes, it's happened quite a bit. Gay, lesbian, non-binary people have reached out. Also, parents that reach out and say my daughter only supports LGBTQ companies. So we're going to give her a wine club membership from you.

**JD:** That's happened. It's amazing.

**JW:** It's also weird still. I look at Neil Patrick Harris. He just is himself, he and his husband. They are gay, they're married, they have kids, and they just put it out there. It's no apologies. It's not like, buy this because it's gay. It's just I'm gay, I'm selling this. So that's going to be the model I'm adopting. We're just going to be ourselves.

**JD:** Let's face it, we're white men. So we still have a leg up.

**WS:** How do you create a welcoming culture? I know you can lead by example. But let's say some people want to make a more welcoming culture. How do you do that?

**JD:** I read a lot of magazines on service, on culture, on management with both huge hotel companies and small hotel companies. The other day I read something about a guy saying, "Now we really need to focus on culture and that's going to be the focus moving forward." My thought was, where have you been the last 15 years?

The best thing I learned from the Four Seasons is you've got to exceed expectations. So we can exceed expectations, but we need to set that tone through myself and through our hotel steward.

It's not rocket science. I just had a housekeeper who left, had a child on her time off, and came back. Now she needs a car to get to work. How am I going to tell her no? When you have an opportunity to get a car to get you to work, you're going to be more supported. We gave her 1,500 bucks, and she has 50 bucks a paycheck paying us back.

So it's those little things about connection. It's that caring. It doesn't take a lot. In California, our biggest expense is payroll. By far our biggest expense is payroll, our biggest headache is payroll. Most companies treat every single person who's involved with that payroll line as an expendable expense item, not as individuals.

Every single employee has my mobile phone. Every employee can text me, call me. And it's not rocket science. It's in every management book. And guess what happens? We never are short on staff.

**WS:** When you decided to own your own winery, how did you approach the style of wines you're making?

**JW:** Between the 1997 vintage and maybe 2013, Napa Valley wines were becoming extremely concentrated, extremely powerful. There was a longer hangtime to create more jammy flavors. Coming from a food background, that makes wines that were very difficult to pair with food, except for a very narrow range of dishes.

So back in 2004, when we're talking about this, we wanted to create a wine that could be paired with food, focused on elegance.

**WS:** When you look down the road five to 10 years from now are you growing? Are you ambitious to expand?

**JW:** In March 2020, we bought a 1927 California craftsman bungalow in downtown Napa. We intend to have it open in the autumn. There will be a kitchen in the middle, and I'll cook you a lunch. And we'll share some wine. We have a piano down there, some accordions, some bongos, and just have an experience where we get to know you, you get to know us. The intent right now is not open to the public. Only a referral from a wine club member can get you in at this point because I don't want people to buy the lunch and feel like they have to pay for the experience. I'm going to give you a free lunch and you can buy the wines.

**JD:** The point is that he needs to be there to cook and tell the story. If he's not available to cook and tell the story, then it's not happening.