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«Business News»

## Gay vintner couple readies Napa events venue

by Matthew S. Bajko

Over the course of a Monday afternoon in mid-April at their Yountville home, husbands **Joe Wolosz** and **Jeff Durham** showed off their culinary skills as they discussed how the dishes they prepared paired with their **Gentleman Farmer** wines. The former San Francisco residents have been presiding over such affairs for members of their wine club and other guests since 2018.

They had invited the Bay Area Reporter to experience their hospitality and sample their wines ahead of their annual Pride Month fundraiser for the **I Gets Better Project**. For the last four years they have donated 10% of their wine sales throughout June to the nonprofit focused on assisting LG-BTQ youth.

This year is the first time they have promoted the philanthropic effort more broadly to the public and have teamed up with San Francisco nightlife promoter and drag queen **Juanita MOREL**, whom they befriended last year, for it, with part of the money raised this year going to **Queer LifeSpace**, the nonprofit mental health services provider she chose as this year's beneficiary of her annual Pride party. As for how much they hope to raise this year, the couple told the B.A.R. that "is up to the consumer."

When the COVID pandemic hit in 2020, they decided to stop their retail sales in the select stores that carried their wines and focus solely on direct-to-consumer sales via their online store.



Joey Wolosz, left, and Jeff Durham stand in their home kitchen in Yountville, where they operate the Gentleman Farmer.

Today, such purchases account for 95% of their business.

"We do very little retail," said Wolosz, who had soaked chicken livers in chardonnay overnight and turned them into a mousse served with homemade brioche bread and spiced nuts he had glazed with a pomegranate molasses.

The couple works directly with vineyard owner **Michael Hanna**, a great-great-grandson of John Muir, on when to pick the rows of grapes they lease that will become bottles of their chardonnay, rosé, pinot noir, and cabernet sauvignon wines. (Prices range from \$37 for their 2021 Rosé to \$169 for their **Almanac blends**.)

Their winemaker, **Jérôme Chéry**, is also gay and hails from France. Late last year, **Wine Enthusiast** awarded 91 points out of 100 to their rosé.

"When we got rated on it, we were surprised. Usually rosés don't get reviewed or scored," said Durham, who owned the **Halcyon Hotel** in San Francisco from the late 1990s until 2003.

For six years he had served on the Yountville Town Council until losing his reelection bid in 2020 over his support of a local measure that would have allowed a cannabis dispensary to seek approval to open in the town. Durham told the B.A.R. he has no plans to seek elective office again and is now focused solely on the couple's business ventures and his weekly activist newsletter **The Yountvillian**.

Wolosz, 55, and Durham, 56, both graduated from **Cal Poly Pomona** in 1985 but never met on campus. It wasn't until a chance encounter on April 10, 1999, at the former **Bar on Castro** (now **Q Bar**) that they would begin dating and eventually marry in 2017.

"We both went into hotels and restaurants," said Wolosz, a member of the band **Phat Ankle**. ("We call our groupies the **Cankles**," he said.)

Eventually, Wolosz enrolled at **UC Davis** and earned a winemaker's certificate. The couple started off making wine in the garage of a friend the year they met, while living in the **Castro**.

They relocated to Yountville in 2003 and released their first public vintage in 2005. A certified LGBTQ business enterprise by the **National LGBT Chamber of Commerce**, **Gentleman Farmer** is the only gay-owned family winery in the **Napa Valley**.

"The one thing we never wanted to be was the gay wine or rainbow wine. Now twenty-something years into this, it is OK to be gay," said Wolosz, who grew up in **Arroyo Grande** south of **Pismo Beach** along California's central coast.

Added Durham, who grew up in Napa, "I am proud of what we make. People are responding to it."

Residing along **Hopper Creek**, they tend to vegetable and herb gardens in raised beds near the coop that houses their Polish chickens. When they launched their food and wine pairing experiences five years ago, they would travel to the homes of **Gentleman Farmer** wine club members. A 50th birthday trip to **Bordeaux, France**, had sparked the idea.

"We were at a chateau winery for lunch. I just thought it was super cool," said Wolosz, who served up a plate of homemade pierogies with chives from the couple's garden.

COVID brought an end to their dining pop-ins, so they started inviting friends to their home to cook for and eventually opened up the guest list as the pandemic came under more control. Of the 280 people who are

members of their wine club, the couple believes they have now hosted all but 20 for one of their lunches.

"This is how we would want you to enjoy the wine when you got home," explained Durham, who had made **malaffi**, Italian spinach ricotta dumplings, with spicy sausage in a marinara sauce in honor of his grandparents who used to serve the dish when his family would visit them in the East Bay city of **Crockett**.

Their culinary gatherings, a few of which have been dinners, are free to attend with membership in the wine club and quickly fill up. Due to their success, the couple purchased a 1929 California Craftsman Bungalow in downtown Napa last year that is turning into an event venue that should open this fall named **The Bungalow** by **Gentleman Farmer**.

### Napa event space

Billed as their "new studio for gustatory well-being," the building's three main rooms will be themed to different motifs symbolizing areas of the **Golden State** meaningful to the couple: sand for the coast, fog for the bay, and forest for the protected woodlands near the **Oregon** border. The front door will sport stained glass featuring the state flower, the **California poppy**, while the entry vestibule will evoke **Tijuana** in honor of migrant farmworkers.

Their plan is to host the private tasting events for upward of eight wine club members and their friends at the new venue, which will also allow them to organize larger gatherings for upwards of 50 people on occasion. They haven't decided if they will start charging for the tasting experiences at **The Bungalow**; for now they do plan to continue only offering it to their wine club members.

"This experience is for people who have been to the valley before and know how wine works. This is to get to know the industry better," explained Durham.

Earlier this year Durham sold off a hotel in **Humboldt County** that he had been overseeing the management of since first purchasing it 15 years ago. He no longer wanted to make the four-hour commute and instead decided it was time to devote his attention fully on the winery brand and its expansion.

"It was just time to focus on **Gentleman Farmer**. With both of us being involved in **Gentleman Farmer**, we can focus on this brand," said Durham.

They had wanted to open their event venue in **Yountville**, but **Sonoma County** zoning rules don't allow the type of food preparation they intend to provide.

"It can be a bite of food, but I want it to be a full meal. The only thing that had what I wanted was **Napa**," noted Wolosz, who is working on a **Gentleman Farmer** cookbook and publishes a magazine for their wine club members filled with his recipes and interviews he conducts with the couple's newsmaker friends and acquaintances.

A magician himself and accordion player, Wolosz envisions hosting monthly salons at the new venue, where attendees can eat, drink wine, and enjoy musicians and other performers they invite. Durham learned how to play the clarinet and also takes part in musically entertaining their guests.

With an outdoor patio space, **The Bungalow** will be a dog-friendly venue, as will be their guesthouse they plan to open next door with five rooms. They finalized their purchase of the adjacent 1888 Victorian building the same day in early April that Durham completed the sale of the hotel in **Fortuna** known as **The Redwood Riverwalk**.

"We get to blend what we do with what we love to do," said Wolosz, who also served a cioppino with shrimp, mussels, scallops and crab before the dessert course.

As for the name **Gentleman Farmer**, the couple connected with the reference to a gentleman's farm located outside the city limit that was tended to for one's pleasure and not for commercial purposes.

"This is for my satisfaction, pleasure, and what I want to do," explained Wolosz, adding that he doesn't view running the winery as work. "Everyday is my vacation."

The winery will be hosting an event June 9 as part of this year's **weeklong Yountville Pride celebration**.

To learn more about **Gentleman Farmer** and order its wines online or join its wine club, visit <https://gentlemanfarmerwines.com> ▼

The Business Briefing column for **Pride Month** will run in the **Bay Area Reporter's June 15 issue**.

Got a tip on **LGBTQ business news**? Call **Matthew S. Bajko** at (415) 829-8836 or e-mail [m.bajko@ebar.com](mailto:m.bajko@ebar.com).