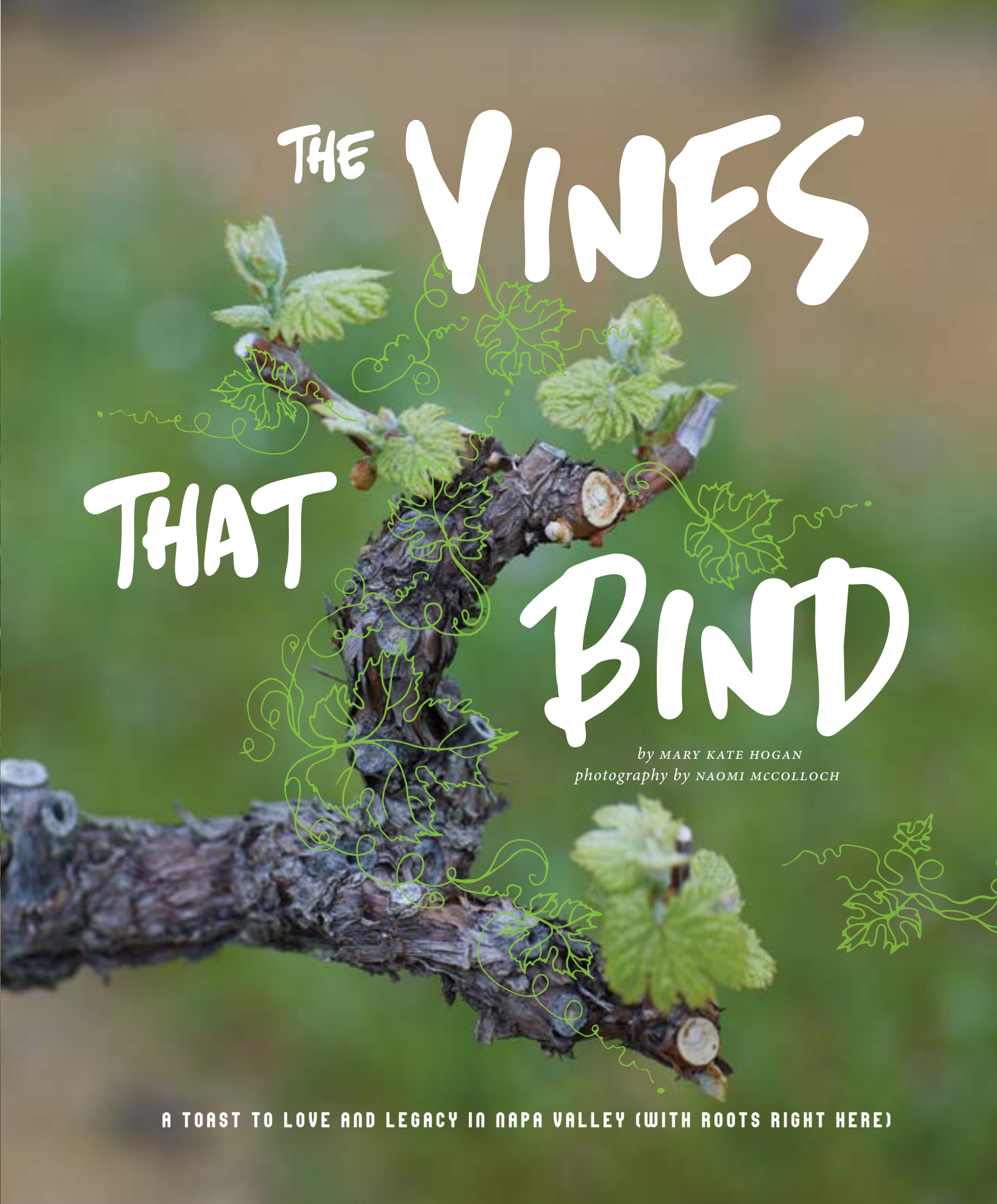


Winemaker Peter Franus with his wife Deanne



# THE VINES THAT BIND

by MARY KATE HOGAN  
photography by NAOMI MCCOLLOCH



A TOAST TO LOVE AND LEGACY IN NAPA VALLEY (WITH ROOTS RIGHT HERE)



**above:** Views from Brandlin Vineyards, where Peter sources grapes for his Cabernet and Zinfandel, with the old Christian Brothers retreat and monastery at Mont La Salle in the distance.

## "WE CALL IT THE LOVE WINE,"

says Deanne Franus of the Zinfandel from Mount Veeder in Napa that is one of her husband's top sellers—a soulful red with a cult following. Ruby in color with a nose of raspberry, white pepper, allspice, a touch of vanilla and a long finish, the wine is made from grapes grown on hillside vines planted in the 1920s. This Peter Franus award-winner is a favorite at tastings, and a recent wine dinner at l'escale was no exception. During a multicourse meal, the 2019 Zin was served with a duck breast croustillant with quince mousse and blackberry for an exquisite pairing that drew raves. Winemaker Peter Franus and his wife Deanne presided over the dinner, bouncing from table to table to greet guests and then sitting and laughing with old friends, including one of Peter's former teammates from Greenwich High football decades ago.

**above:** Deanne and Peter Franus toast with one of his reds in the barrel chai at Laird Family Estate, where he produces PF wines.  
**right:** Opening a bottle of Peter's flagship wine, Brandlin Vineyard Mount Veeder Zinfandel

Backstory to the Zinfandel: This is the wine that sparked the couple's romance. While Deanne and a friend were eating at the Foothill Café in Napa during a weekend getaway in 2000, they asked the waiter for a recommendation, and he brought out one of Peter's Zinfandels. The ladies liked it so much they decided to head to the vineyard for a tasting, where they met Peter in person.

A few months later, Deanne came back to Napa for her birthday and visited the vineyard again. "We had a connection, and that day became our anniversary," Peter says. Five years

later, they married and Deanne would go on to fall in love with the wine business as well. "We tell people, 'You better watch out for this wine, there's a lot of energy there,'" she says.

Peter Franus is a veteran of the Napa Valley wine scene who has earned major industry accolades, *Wine Spectator* calling him "one of California's finest blenders and winemakers," and Robert M. Parker saying he has "the Midas touch." Peter and Deanne, who also works for PF Wines, live in Sacramento and travel the globe to promote and enjoy his wines, connecting with enthusiasts in locales from

Belgium to the Czech Republic, Taipei to Tokyo.

An unpretentious talent, Peter believes in learning about customers the organic way—going out and talking to them in person. Last fall, he returned to New England, as he does at least once a year, and hosted that dinner at l'escale here in his hometown, a chance to savor his wines over a multicourse meal with a dining room full of guests. At a time when wine giants dominate—large companies produce about 80 percent of all wine in the United States—Peter Franus runs a boutique operation and follows more traditional processes with a simple goal:



**above:** Some Peter Franus Wines are made with fruit from vines planted a century ago. **opposite:** The fruit and volcanic soil from Mt. Veeder distinguish wines from that region • Peter uses a wine thief, a winemaker’s tool, to draw wine from the barrel for sampling. • The hilly Mt. Veeder appellation is one of the wettest regions in Napa.



to make wines that are delicious. He takes a minimalist approach, focusing on the highest-quality fruit, barrel aging and never any additives.

“Our whole goal is to make sure that wines taste good, whether you’re a novice or a geek. A lot of energy goes into that, making a balanced wine that doesn’t have too much of anything. Everything is in harmony.”

## EAST COAST ROOTS

Growing up in Greenwich as an all-state football player for the Cardinals, Peter did not have any inkling that winemaker could be on his list of possible careers. The allure of Napa and the rocky terrain of Mount Veeder were a world away. His family lived in Glenville, where his Polish grandfather had settled after moving from Pennsylvania to work at the felt mill.

Peter recalls dining out at The Clam Box and Manero’s, as well as a classic spot on the Avenue called The Town House, which had hunting scenes with beagles on the walls. His family had season tickets for the Yankees, and he remembers stopping on the way home at the Newport Inn

in Port Chester, where his mom would have a glass of Chianti with dinner. That was about the extent of his wine knowledge at the time.

“I’ve been in California a long time and I still love the East Coast,” he says, gazing out at Indian Harbor from The Delamar, spying the Island Beach Ferry with golden-leaved maples in the park beyond it. He recalls days spent on the Sound fishing for striped bass with his uncle and riding that ferry out to the island on summer days, always returning with a treat of a Sugar Daddy from the concession stand.

Dressed in dark jeans and a black long-sleeve T-shirt, he has a runner’s slim build these days (running is his other passion), but he was once a football star at Greenwich High School. After his high school physics teacher persuaded him to apply to Berkeley, he headed to California to study journalism. Writing came naturally to him, and he still writes some of the copy for his wines, but he decided it wouldn’t become his career. To make money, he worked briefly for the Beverly Hills Moving Company, schlepping celebrities’ furniture and boxes in and out of houses. Then, after a trip around Europe that

involved dabbling in some French wines, and after applying to a few graduate programs in other fields, he decided to attend CalState Fresno for a program in viticulture.

“A light bulb went off,” Peter says. “I thoroughly enjoyed what I was doing. I said, ‘This feels right.’ ”

## ALL ROADS LEAD TO MOUNT VEEDER

Peter’s relationships helped him forge a path in Napa, beginning when a friend from Carmel referred him to a member of the Chappellet family, owners of one of the oldest vineyards in Napa. Through a winemaker there, he landed an interview with Bill Hill, who had an operation on Mt. Veeder and was also managing the Hess Collection. He worked for Hill, for six months and then went on to Chateau St. Jean for the harvest. He made the connection with Mt. Veeder Winery in 1981 and got his first opportunity to work as an assistant winemaker for Michael Bernstein, who was one of the early boutique Cabernet producers. His first wines





“FOR ME, THE HANDS-OFF REALLY DISPLAYS THE TRUE CHARACTER OF THAT VINEYARD AND THOSE GRAPES.”

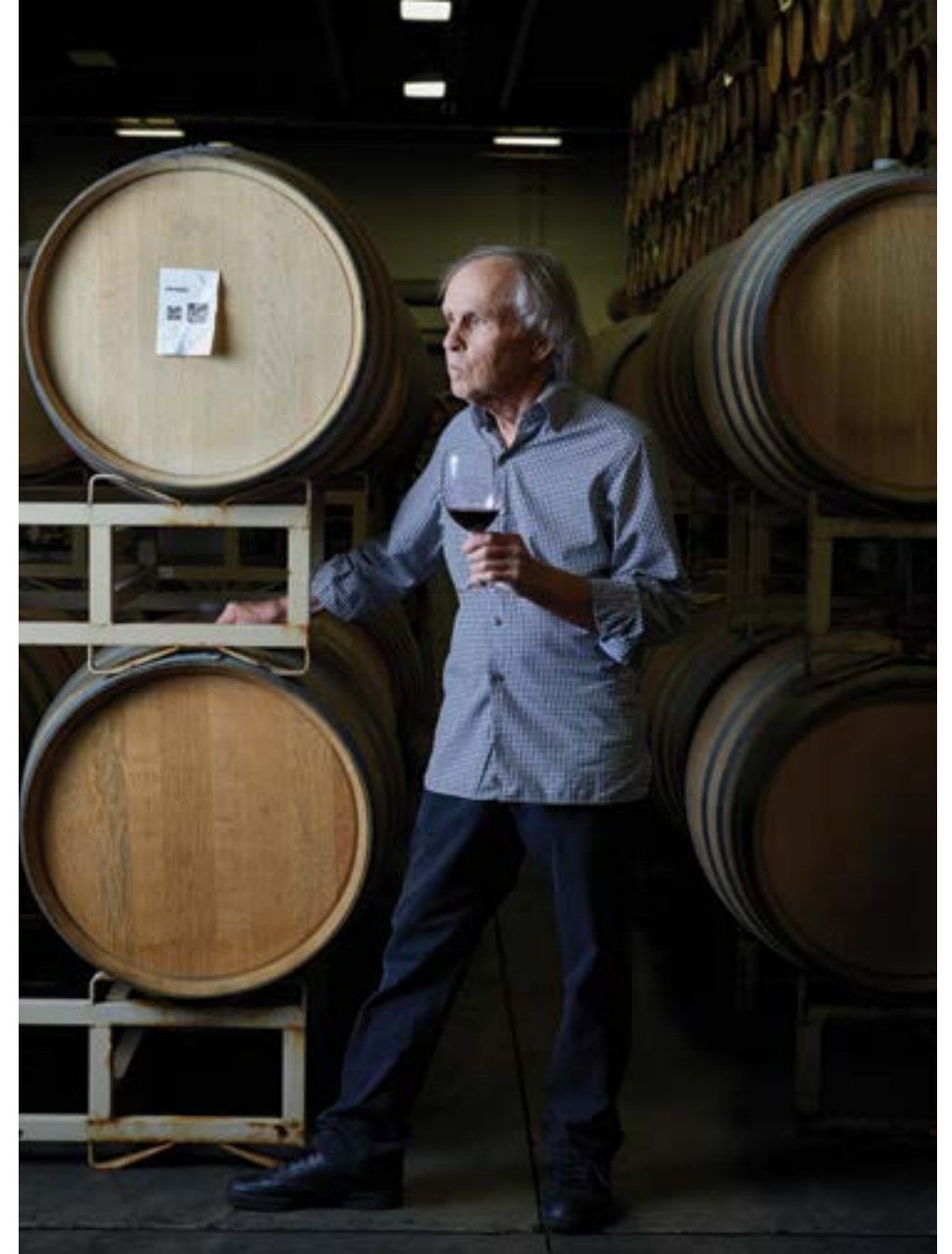
coincided with Clos du Bois, Stag’s Leap, part of that Napa renaissance when wines took a giant leap in quality.

Every year of his life in Napa has been intertwined with Mount Veeder. “I remember going up there for the first time, and it was a very different terrain than I had thought about in Napa Valley. It’s one of the cooler parts, lots of redwoods. It’s also one of the wettest parts of Napa. The storms come in from the West and drop almost double the amount of rain,” Peter explains. “Mt. Veeder was a volcano, so there’s some volcanic contribution to the terrain. It’s also sedimentary, so it’s a very interesting mix of soils. It’s developed a very great reputation, in particular for Cabernet Sauvignon.”

Over the years, Peter developed his own positive reputation and close friendships in Napa, including with Chester Brandlin of the Brandlin Vineyards family. “When you go up to see Chester, you leave your watch in the mailbox, because time has no meaning,” he jokes. “A real character.”

In the ’90s, the Brandlin estate was a also working farm, where they raised turkeys and had orchards. When the matriarch of the family died and the property was in flux, it wound up being bought by Cuvaison. But the company allowed Peter the rights to the grapes, giving him the ability to produce his Zinfandel long-term; in 2016, he approached them about producing a Cabernet. “They let me because of our long-term relationship,” he says. “I get the name out there for myself and for them.” (That Cabernet went on to receive 95 points from Antonio Galloni, Vinous.)

For the grapes for his Grenache Blanc, Peter works with Jim Fore’s Cobb Mountain Vineyard in Red Hills, Lake County. The vineyard, 3,000-feet-in-elevation, is 25 years old, with volcanic soils that yield exceptional fruit. He calls this white a “cerebral wine” that blends the best attributes of Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc. With the difference in day and nighttime temperatures and the high elevation, the vines yield intensely flavored grapes. And, as with all his wines, Peter believes in simply capturing that flavor.



**above:** Peter in the barrel chai at Laird Family Estate, sampling and contemplating a red.

“Don’t hover over your wine, or you make the wine nervous,” he says, referring to the way some winemakers manipulate and tinker with their wines. “When it’s not broken, why do all this stuff? For me, the hands-off really displays the true character of that vineyard and those grapes. The more you manipulate it, the more you destroy the essence of that vineyard. We work with the best fruits, and there’s not a lot of manipulation.”

Less-midrange wines are often modified and contain additives and coloring, he notes. In Europe, wines have ingredient labeling so

consumers will know what they’re drinking; there’s a call for this type of labeling to be used in the States as well. In the meantime, he says, “Our wines are very pure.”

## WE’LL DRINK TO THAT

Experts aren’t the only ones who applaud Peter’s wines. Chefs, distributors and everyday customers seem to develop an unusual attachment. Celebrities have spent time at his tasting room in Napa, too, and one actor, Patrick Stewart of *Star Trek* fame, embarked on a



“DON’T HOVER OVER YOUR WINE, OR YOU MAKE THE WINE NERVOUS.”

# AN INSIDER’S GUIDE TO NAPA

A few of Peter and Deanne’s favorite places to eat and drink in wine country

**Angele Restaurant & Bar**

A riverfront bistro serving rustic French fare in an old boathouse

**Bistro Don Giovanni**

An Italian landmark with beautiful garden grounds

**Michi Japanese Cuisine**

The creation of female sushi chef Michiyo Hagio

**Mustards Grill**

A 30-year tradition for seasonal California cuisine; where chefs go on their night off

**Torc**

High-energy, global farm-to-table fare in a relaxed atmosphere

long-term affair with the wines. Sixteen years after his visit, he was in Brooklyn at Stonehouse Wine Bar enjoying the Brandlin Zin when he emailed Peter to try to track it down at a store in the city. He was opening in *Macbeth* on Broadway at that time. The Franuses wound up watching him perform in New York and getting a backstage tour. Then, months later, the winery received a message from a bottle shop in Stoke-on-Trent, England. Once again, it was Patrick Stewart wanting to locate PF wines near his home in Britain.

Long before social media, devotees of PF Wines brought bottles on their travels and sent back memories—cards with printed photos enclosed. They recall a couple who shared a snapshot of them standing by the Great Wall of China holding the Zinfandel, which they had snuck in their suitcase to celebrate a special birthday.

Frank Romantini, managing director of Profile Wine Group in Ontario, where PF wines have a strong market, says the Cabernet and Merlot tend to sell out with his clients, “and for good reason—they are the bomb!” He has gotten close to the Franuses through years of working with them, calling them “genuinely down to earth ... with an infectious sense of humor.”



**Local Sips:** Enjoy PF Wines at l’escal or pick up a bottle at Harbor Point Wines & Spirits or Post Wine and Spirits.



A testament to their friendship, Frank says he approached Peter with a special project: He and his business partner were searching for a Napa Valley Cabernet to honor their late partner. “It had to be a small-production, meticulously crafted wine, created by a winemaker who not only understood the project’s significance but would also pour their heart into it. The goal was to sell it to our clients, with all proceeds donated to charity in memory of our late partner.”

Frank says that every detail was executed flawlessly and that he still has a note from Peter on the bottling date of the first vintage. “Every time I read it, it stirs up such powerful emotions.” 🍷

# IN GOOD TASTE

## ON THE ROAD AND AT HOME WITH PETER & DEANNE

Peter and Deanne travel frequently, with recent trips to Romania and Poland and upcoming plans to see more of our country, touring Virginia and Rapid City and Sioux Falls this spring. It’s a true perk of the business.

“One of the great things is visiting other regions and the connections you have with other winemakers. There’s that camaraderie,” Peter says. “We’ve been to wineries in Israel, Argentina, Turkey, Romania, Canada. We’re always welcomed, and I like to see what other countries are doing. They have indigenous wines we don’t here.”

But when the couple are in California, they often eat at home. Peter loves to cook (everything from Italian to Mexican to Thai) and also keeps a garden where he grows tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, herbs and Japanese eggplant.

“He wakes up in the morning thinking about what he might make for dinner,” Deanne says. “And his joy is in preparing the food and the wine and bringing joy to people that way.”

Her most-requested “Chef Peter” meals? Deanne says he is constantly creating new dishes, but a few she loves are his ginger-infused carrot soup (with Grenache Blanc); seafood medley in a saffron broth (with Red Hills Lake County Grenache Blanc or Lake County Albarino); Southwest-inspired pork tenderloin with sweet red pepper chutney (with Napa Valley Merlot) and a classic Nebraska Cornhusker Steak, rib-eye or filet, grilled to perfection (with Brandlin Vineyard Mt. Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon).

For their business, Deanne says she handles “the stuff he doesn’t love ... compliance reports and paperwork.” At home, she never does the cooking, letting him shine at what comes naturally to him. “I’m a good cook appreciator,” says the fortunate recipient of fresh home cooking paired with excellent wines.

Thinking about what has led to her husband’s success, attracting fans around the world, she replies, “He’s a genuine, authentic winemaker. And the style of his wine—it draws people back.”