

DINING OUT | FOOD | WINE | ENTERTAINING

# TASTE

of the seacoast™

Painted Hills Bavette Steak with sauteed  
chard and skillet blue corn bread  
from *Vida Cantina*

## BEST OF TASTE 2013

Our Readers'  
Winning Picks!  
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### PIZZA!

A ROUNDUP OF THE REGION'S  
EXCELLENT SLICES

### SIPPING APPLES

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OF AGE

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# Joe Donelan

Founder, Donelan Family Wines, Santa Rosa, California

Joe Donelan believes that everyone deserves to experience a great bottle of wine. “Wine is a journey not a destination” is written on every bottle of his wines. His award-winning boutique winery, Donelan Family Wines, is located in Sonoma and produces world-class Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Grenache, and Roussanne. I met Donelan and his Syrahs several years ago at a wine dinner hosted by one of his customers. We sat down on Nantucket this summer to reconnect, taste his 2011 Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and discuss his wine business.

## When did you become interested in wine?

Around the same time I fell in love with Nantucket. My wife and I started coming to the island in 1976 and bought our first house here in 1984.

## When did you become serious about the wine industry?

I became friendly with Michael Fahey, the sommelier at Topper’s restaurant at The Wauwinet on Nantucket. Topper’s has an amazing wine cellar and has the highest award from *Wine Spectator* magazine. I would go to the restaurant weekly to learn about wine—going through all the regions and varietals with Michael. During the off-season, I traveled with him through wine regions to further my wine knowledge while he was in search of unique wines for the restaurant. We went to California, where I fell in love with Sonoma, and Europe, where I fell in love with Rhone varietals and Burgundies.

## When did you begin your wine business?

Officially in 2000. I began making contacts with vineyards in Sonoma to create quality terroir-driven Syrah and Rhone varietals,



then organized a production team and founded Pax Wine Cellars. We changed our name in 2008 to Donelan Family Wines and started to release more wines.

## Tell us about your wines.

Wines should engage—a great bottle of wine expresses its terroir through its unique flavor and aroma, which are attributed to the growing environment of the grapes. I like all my wines to have balance, great structure, and good acidity.

Our wines are made “in the vineyards” from unique sites with incredible microclimates. The Donelan Syrahs vary depending on vineyard locations. The Obsidian is from Knight’s Valley—it’s from a rocky site that produces small but concentrated fruit that leads to a dark and mysterious intensity. The Richards Family Vineyard is nestled in the Schultz Valley. Our other Syrahs are from the Walker Vine Hill Vineyard and Kobler Family Vineyard located in the Russian River Valley. Our newest wines are Pinot Noir Two Brothers, named after my two sons who both work at the winery, and Chardonnay Nancie made

from “clone 4” grapes creating a European style that’s smooth with clarity and finesse, touches of citrus, honey and spice, and finishing long and smooth. We have a Rosé as well.

## What do you feel is unique about your business?

We sell most of our wine direct to consumers. This allows us to understand what people enjoy and to focus on perfecting the Donelan wine portfolio with new styles. No matter how small or large an order, I personally call or write a handwritten note welcoming them into the “family.” I spend a lot of time participating in fundraisers, wine tastings, and wine dinners either in a restaurant or at someone’s home. I really want to know the people who are drinking our wines.

## What do you do for fun?

I enjoy meeting new people. I’m fascinated with history and read a lot of books on the subject. I also appreciate Impressionistic art and attend art exhibits. **1**

[donelanwines.com](http://donelanwines.com)

BY JOANN ACTIS-GRANDE