



Apr 05 Weekly Interview: Tyler Thomas

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Each week, as regular readers know, we pose a series of questions to a winemaker. This week, we're featuring Tyler Thomas of [Donelan Family Wines](#) in Santa Rosa, California.



A St. Louis native, Tyler credits his interest in food and wine to his grandmother, who grew up in Nice, France. This interest only grew after graduating from Colorado State University, when he traveled to Bordeaux. Upon returning to the States, Tyler returned to school to study viticulture and enology at U.C. Davis. After completing his studies, a scholarship took Tyler to the Rheingau. He then returned to California and joined the team at Donelan in 2008.

Check out our interview with Tyler below the fold.

What is your general winemaking philosophy?

In this industry, my focus has almost exclusively been with producers who sought to maximize wine quality — and hence, your pleasure — by maximizing our understanding of any particular place and bringing forth that expression with deft work in the cellar. To steal a phrase from a colleague, we practice preemptive minimalism: what can we do upstream in the process to avoid necessitating more intervention downstream?

What's open in your kitchen right now?

Donelan Nancie Chardonnay 2011, Keplinger Kingpin Rows Syrah 2009, and 2005 Michel Magnien Gevrey-Chambertin have all been enjoyed over the last few days.

Who are your favorite winemakers in history, through personal account, or their wines?

I have had great fortune and help in this industry and I'd be remiss not to mention my mentors along the way: Kathy Joseph of Fiddlehead Cellars; Stephane Vivier of HdV Wines; and Aubert de Villaine. I also have admired Paul Draper for his philosophy not just towards wine, but towards the entire Ridge Vineyards organization.



The Donelan Team.

What new winemakers are you most excited about, and why?

Hmmmm, what constitutes new? I'm only ten years in myself! I think it will be interesting to see how young European winemakers with international experience challenge the traditions of their regions.

How do you spend your days off?

Generally with my lovely wife and three children enjoying the bounty of Sonoma County. Typically, we play sports, dance, cook together, and laugh out loud.

What's the best wine you've ever tasted? The most interesting?



The best wine was also an amazing experience: 1986 Domaine de la Romanee Conti Montrachet in the cellars of the Domaine.

The most interesting may have been a wine we made at Donelan: 2009 Syrah/Viognier co-ferment that had 40% Viognier where the Viognier was also 100% whole cluster. A wild wine that only produced two barrels and was blended into a cuvee.

What's the oldest bottle in your cellar? The most expensive?

The oldest is 1978 William Fèvre Grand Cru Chablis Les Clos. Beyond that I think I have some late-90s Napa Cabernet. I have a few expensive Burgundies but Jacques Selosse Champagne is probably my most expensive and a wine I wish I could drink daily!

If you had to pick one red and one white to drink for the next month with every dinner, what would you choose?

The white is easy and specific (if I don't pick Selosse, which would kill my budget): Domaine Huet Grand Cru (any of them) Chenin Blanc Sec. The red is tougher. I suppose it would have to be a Pinot or Syrah, something not overdone, slightly savory, and structured with a certain energy that makes me want a second glass.

What's your biggest challenge as a winemaker?

I think patience is one of the best tools of a winemaker and one of the hardest to employ. We are taught to act and to solve problems but wine is so resilient that sometimes stepping back, taking a breath and waiting can accomplish all the wine needs.

What's your favorite wine region in the world — other than your own?

It is really difficult to avoid saying Burgundy or Northern Rhone but I like different regions for different reasons. For years, I wanted to get a full time gig in New Zealand simply so I could live close to high alpine regions and the ocean — also the wines are not bad! I've fallen for Piedmontese wines in a bad way but feel I can't claim it as a favorite having never been. The Mosel and Alsace are right up there, along with the Loire. But in the end, I think I'll have to stick with fresh, pure, clean Burgundy.

Is beer ever better than wine?

That's a rhetorical question, right? Of course it can be better! I'm a contextual drinker, and certain context certainly calls for beer over wine, or whiskey over wine, or martini over wine... you get the point.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

Although I don't consider myself a fashionable person, I do have a shoe named after me. Long story short, I'm a big fan of Fluevog shoes and was telling a friend that they really ought to make a winemaker shoe that's durable and stylish. Unbeknownst to me my friend wrote Fluevog about me, and six months later I get an email from Greg Fluevog saying my shoes were in store and are named after me. It was a fantastic surprise!

If you weren't making wine for a living, what would you be doing?

In real life I'd probably be a baker as I have a love affair with good bread. In a fantasy life I'd be a professional baseball player or some kind of professional athlete like a surfer.

How do you define success?

I define success when the Donelans and I all enjoy drinking our finished wines and that we love to share what we've crafted proudly with others. Additionally, I enjoy learning from former employees that they are passionate about how we went about cultivating their experience and have a desire to continue to be our ambassadors. I believe in cultivating wines and cultivating people. It's a great life.



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