



Joe Nielsen, Winemaker

Joe Donelan is quick to recognize and promote young talent, and this has been no different in the case of winemaker Joe Nielsen. Throughout his nascent career, Nielsen has consistently demonstrated a voracious appetite for exploring both vineyard sites and cellar techniques in his role as winemaker. This ambition makes him the perfect fit for the Donelan family, whose desire to produce unique and high quality wines from Rhône and Burgundian varietals in Sonoma County is insatiable.

Joe Nielsen got his start in winemaking not in the California fields or a university greenhouse, but in the backyard of his parents' home outside of Lansing, Michigan. As he entered college, Nielsen was on a pre-med track at Michigan State University when a close friend asked, "Have you ever thought about studying something weird like winemaking?" This passing comment sparked Nielsen's imagination, thus setting him on his course.

During his freshman year, Nielsen became enamored with the idea of winemaking and began pouring over French books about viticulture. MSU had started an exploratory winemaking program, but at age 18, Nielsen was not permitted to enroll in the program. Determined to push forward, he began researching viticulture and enology on his own and convinced his parents to let him plant an experimental vineyard in their 20-acre backyard, where he planted 400-500 vines to French hybrid grapes.

Determined to participate in his university's winemaking program, Nielsen, continued to lobby the faculty and telling them of his vineyard project. Impressed by his passion and persistence, the professor allowed Nielsen into the program, with the caveat that he would not be permitted to taste any of the wines.

In May 2007, Nielsen completed the MSU winemaking program and received a Bachelor of Science in Horticulture, and then took a job in the cellar at Black Star Farms in Northern Michigan.

In July 2008, Nielsen joined Merryvale Vineyards in Napa Valley. Nielsen spent the next year learning every aspect of the winemaking business with the Napa Valley producer before receiving what he considers to be the opportunity of a lifetime.

In March 2009, Nielsen was introduced to Tyler Thomas, then winemaker at Donelan Family Wines. Thomas was immediately impressed by Nielsen's enthusiasm and thirst for knowledge. At just 23 years old, Nielsen joined the Donelan team as cellar master and was quickly promoted to assistant winemaker.

In 2013, Nielsen was promoted to head winemaker. Since joining the Donelan team, he's contributed to the expansion of the Pinot and Chardonnay programs including Genevieve's Block, Tripp's Block and Cushing's Block, and also oversees several operational aspects of the winery.

Nielsen's inherent desire for hands-on learning keeps him involved in local wine tasting groups and keeps his passport full of stamps from some of the world's best wine regions. He lives in Santa Rosa with his wife and daughter and spends his free time enjoying Sonoma County's great outdoors and pursuing his passion for gardening.

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