

THE LAST GENTLEMEN RACERS: FERRARI'S 360 CHALLENGE

Robb Report

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Insider Tasting

John Thoreen, aka the Wine Tutor, will show you Napa's private side.

MOST VISITORS TO NAPA VALLEY have a single priority: tasting, and lots of it. John Thoreen, also known as the Wine Tutor, caters to a different crowd. His clients—oenophiles, collectors, and those seeking to expand their knowledge of northern California wines—visit the living rooms of prominent wine-country families, the otherwise off-limits cellars of top vintners, and the backcountry roads on which Napa's tipsy tourists rarely, if ever, tread.

Once a teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute, Thoreen migrated an hour and a half northeast to St. Helena more than three decades ago. He built his reputation in the Napa region over the course of 17 years as the director of the Wine Center at Meadowood Resort, where he conducted educational programs, selected vintages for the resort's wine list, and served as a liaison to the hundreds of wineries and winemakers in the valley. While at Meadowood, Thoreen forged friendships with Jack Cakebread, Margaret Duckhorn, and other influential winemakers and winery owners, contacts he now calls upon for his Wine Tutor clients.

Thoreen's business offers customized one-, two-, and three-day trips to Napa's finer, and often least accessible, vineyards and wineries. Thoreen interviews his "students" before an excursion, determines an itinerary based on their preferences, and schedules visits with the winemakers—even if those winemakers shun tours and tastings. "They trust me to screen visitors," says Thoreen. "Not all of the small cult wineries are up for a day with your average wine-country tourist."

Thoreen's tours, which generally visit three wineries per day, may include experiences as diverse as a private Insignia tasting at Joseph Phelps Vineyards and a visit to the home of Jeff and Valerie Gargiulo, where you might sip wines in the family's Italian country kitchen. The Gargiulos, who live in

Beverly Hills during the week, run Gargiulo Vineyards out of their weekend home in Oakville. They do not have a typical tasting room or marketing department, but their 2001 Money Road Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon, especially when enjoyed in the comfort of the Gargiulo home, speaks for itself.

The experience is no less intimate at Rudd Estate, where Charles Thomas, the director of vineyards and winemaking,

leads you into a cool grotto to glimpse the private, glassed-in wine collection and tasting table of Leslie Rudd (owner of the vineyard and the Dean and DeLuca specialty foods company). At the new Cliff Lede winery, General Manager Michael Updegraff steers you out of the bustling tasting room and into the quiet, musty, and private sparkling wine caves (remnants of the S. Anderson winery that once occupied the site) for a tasting of the 2001 Poetry Cabernet Sauvignon.

Thoreen treats lunch as another learning opportunity, taking his pupils to a secluded picnic spot on Diamond Mountain to discuss *terroir*, soil quality, and wine-country microclimates, or to the dining room of Robin Lail's Howell Mountain home. Lail, former assistant to Robert Mondavi and a fourth-generation Napa Valley

winemaker (her great-granduncle founded Inglenook Vineyards), owns a beautiful hillside vineyard from which she produces her flagship 2000 J. Daniel Cuvée, which is named for her father. Over a discussion of family and Napa's wine-making roots, Thoreen serves lunch—roasted vegetables, pasta, cheese, and bread from Bouchon Bakery—paired with Lail's delicious blend. After all, no trip to Napa Valley would be complete without a little tasting.

—MARCIA SMART



John Thoreen – The Wine Tutor tailors visits for small groups who want to capture the essence of the Napa Valley.

Go to www.winetutor.com.

The Wine Tutor, 707.738.5274, www.winetutor.com