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Grape expectations

Thomas Rivers Brown has been hailed as 'the most successful winemaker in California'.
Now, visitors to Napa Valley can taste the fruits of his labours

By Victoria MOORE

It's a crisp October day on both sides of the Atlantic when I speak to Thomas Rivers Brown. In Napa, where he is, there is just one day left of the harvest. 'Because of how tough last year was, everything we pick feels like a small victory,' he says.

In 2020, the smoke from wildfires that raged across California tainted the grapes of countless vineyards so that, even if they were made into wine, it often wasn't good enough to bottle. 'We actually had a vineyard burn down. Which I didn't think was possible,' says Brown. To everyone's relief, this season – another drought year – is looking much better.

Having Brown roll up to your vineyard is the Napa wine equivalent of getting Lionel Messi along to run your local football-training session. Quietly spoken, the 49-year-old wine auto-didact has a calm energy that belies his status as 'by almost any measure, the most successful winemaker in California', in the words of writer and wine fanatic, Jay McInerney.

Routinely praised for his 'instinctive touch', Brown has such a knack for producing wines that win a perfect score that he can afford not to 'think about that stuff much', though he diplomatically says that when a project gets its first 100-pointer he is 'very excited for the clients'. As you can imagine, there isn't so much a waiting list for Brown's services as a coterie of (very) interested suitors. Because as well as running his own wine brand, Rivers-Marie, with his wife, Brown consults on another '40 to 50' ultra-premium projects to which he adds just one or two very carefully selected new clients a year. The current roll call includes Schrader, Revana, Far Niente, Round Pound, Shibumi Knoll, Stone the Crows and also Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley, a new resort from the international luxury hotel group, within a working wine estate, that has just opened in the city of Calistoga.

Wine is never a short-term game and Brown came on board with the Four Seasons project eight years ago. Calistoga is famous for its natural hot springs and mud baths and the new resort, at the base of Mount Saint Helena, was imagined as a peaceful retreat where visitors can stay in calmly decorated rooms, suites and villas, with views across the vines and oak-covered hills, rejuvenate in the spa and enjoy fine wine and food. The resort's Truss restaurant and bar is led by chef Erik Anderson, previously of the Michelin-starred Coi in San Francisco. It has a 250-strong wine list, with a special focus on wines that are local not just to Napa but to the immediate vicinity of the Calistoga AVA (American Viticultural Area).

Naturally, given that Calistoga lies in Napa Valley, the developers were also ambitious for the resort to be home to a top-notch vineyard and winery. This, the Elusa Winery, was what Brown was enlisted to oversee. There was already a vineyard on the site when he started. 'We actually made wine from the original vineyard for the first couple of vintages of Elusa and those are now bottled and for sale to hotel guests at the winery,' he says. Then the vineyard was torn up and a new one planted to Brown's design.



'Coming here to Napa Valley and trying to figure out what you like involves quite a bit of tasting'

FROM TOP Thomas Rivers Brown; the Barrel Room at the Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley; the resort's restaurant. OPPOSITE Californian sun over the Four Seasons vineyard, a 4.7-acre site protected by the Palisades mountains and oak-covered hills



'Making wine for a couple of years gave us a really good sense of what was good there and that the property itself was high quality [terroir],' explains Brown. '[The original] was cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc and we've returned the property to 100 per cent cabernet sauvignon; couldn't find the right dirt for cab franc.'

Brown has carved a reputation as a cabernet sauvignon specialist – the grape makes up around 80 per cent of the many tonnes he looks after each year – but his background made any career in wine a surprising choice. He grew up in the South Carolina town of Sumter where, in his Southern Baptist family, the drinks of choice were beer, iced tea or lemonade, and when teetotal relatives came to the house, 'everyone had to hide their beers – a little ridiculous, but a nice show of respect'. After a degree in English and economics he considered investment banking, 'but I saw so many friends a couple of years older than me come back from those jobs 50 pounds heavier [and looking] like they hadn't slept in two weeks. It was kind of unsavoury, didn't appeal to me at all.'

At this point I would usually make a wry comment about how at least a career in investment banking would have allowed him to buy plenty of fine wine. But Brown's consultancy fees 'for a really small project' start at \$3,500 a month, and 'then there are folks that pay me upwards of a million dollars a year'. This enables him to spend \$250,000 a year on wine to taste. What does he buy? 'Pinot and chardonnay from all over; a lot of brunello and barolo; southern Rhône.' Also, 'a lot of Champagne. I really, really love champagne, that's why I will never make [sparkling wine]'. He also collects Aston Martins (his favourite is a 2009 Aston Martin DB9 that was built as a one-off for the New York Auto Show, grey with a camel interior).

Brown started in wine at the bottom, working his way from the restaurant and tasting-room floor and into the cellar, making a meteoric ascent. It was tasting – everywhere and as often as he could – that taught him so much, so it's no surprise that when I ask what advice he has for those familiar with Bordeaux and keen to get a grip on Napa, the answer is: taste. 'Napa is really still a super-young region. So I don't think you can [yet] make a pronouncement about a style of wine at a particular place and have it be accurate over the lifespan of that winery. Coming here and trying to figure out what you like involves quite a bit of tasting.'

Guests at the Four Seasons Napa Valley will probably want to start with the Elusa wines, made by Brown on the property, and can drop in for a tasting session guided by a member of Brown's team. Brown's winemaking style is that less (intervention) is more: 'The site signature, the vintage signature, the varietal signature, all those things come through, the less you do to the wine.'

So when you take a sip of Elusa, what you're tasting is the landscape you can see: Calistoga soil and Calistoga sun. ●

fourseasons.com/napavalley/elusawinery.com