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A New Fall Classic

Hall of Fame pitcher Tom Seaver crafts a powerful Cabernet from Napa's Diamond Mountain



By James Laube

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It was the last stop, the final piece of real estate that Tom and Nancy Seaver planned to look at. After two years of searching California, Oregon and even Colorado for a place to build a home and grow grapes, the couple was just hours away from a flight home to Greenwich, Conn. Nancy could hardly have been happier—none of the dozens of properties the Seavers had seen fit the bill, and maybe, just maybe, this would put an end to Tom's vineyard pipe dream once and for all.

It had all started one night in 1995, when Seaver abruptly announced that he wanted to pull up stakes on the East Coast, move back to California, and plant a vineyard. His wife was aghast. "We'll get you into therapy," she recalls saying, not making light of the situation. "You can go once a week or twice. It will work wonders. We can work on this. You'll get over it."

The couple had finally made it. They'd put their two daughters through college and paid off their mortgage. They had the time and financial security to enjoy retirement, until Tom dropped the bombshell. "I can't live

here anymore," he told Nancy that night. "I have to move."

Seaver wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to do, but was anxious. The Major League Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher had been out of the big leagues for a decade. Being a radio broadcaster didn't satisfy his yearning for fulfillment; as long as he worked in baseball, he would always be "Tom Seaver the All-Star, former Met, world-champion hurler," and frankly, he was ready for something else. "I didn't want to be 'Tom Seaver' all my life," he says. There was more to life than baseball.

Late in Seaver's career, his brother-in-law had planted a seed: "What are you going to do when you're done with baseball? You'll be 40 and still have a life ahead." Seaver didn't have an answer, but eventually came to think: Maybe I'll buy land and grow grapes.

On that last sweep through Napa Valley, in 1997, the Seavers had stumbled upon an overgrown, forested parcel near the top of Diamond Mountain Road, a sort of no-man's-land that had somehow gone unnoticed for years, "A cotton-pickin' gold mine," in Seaver's words. Once they hacked their way through the brush and trees, they discovered a breathtaking view, setting into motion what would eventually become Seaver's namesake GTS (short for George Thomas Seaver), which has quickly become one of the region's most exciting new Cabernet Sauvignon labels. The first vintage tasted by *Wine Spectator*, the 2008, scored 97 points on the 100-point scale; the current release 2010 earned 94 points (\$110).

Tom Seaver earned good money playing baseball, but his salary was nowhere near what one of baseball's greatest pitchers would command today. As a rookie in 1967, he earned \$40,000. When he retired in 1986, his salary topped \$1 million. As the couple talked about his vineyard dream, and what it might cost, reality sunk in.

"We really couldn't afford it," says Nancy, Seaver's wife of 47 years. Tom laughs as she recounts the conversation. "I just said, 'Hmm,'" recalls Nancy.

"Then I realized he was so determined. We'd been partners all these years, and I did some creative thinking: We can go out there and buy 5 acres and you can go out there for long stretches, just like baseball. But he said, 'No, we need to cut the cord and go.'"

Midlife crisis or not, Seaver was bent on finding a place where he could grow his favorite wine, Zinfandel. As the couple unlocked the gate to the site on Diamond Mountain, Seaver paused, turned around and drove down the hill to Ace Hardware in Calistoga, to buy tools so they could clear a path on the 116-acre parcel. He became increasingly excited.

How was it that this property had gone undeveloped, he thought, wondering, too, if they'd end up covered with poison oak. "I love telling this story: I knew there was a relatively flat spot somewhere," he begins, standing on the sidewalk leading to his and Nancy's home, shoeless, wearing white socks and a cardinal-and-gold Seaver Vineyards baseball cap while finishing off a banana. Then the conversation veers in a different direction, and takes in a baseball analogy. It is a subject Seaver, who will turn 69 this fall, turns to often, as he has a rich array of captivating stories involving some of the game's greatest players. "This whole [wine project] is very analogous to this," he says. "I'm pitching, there are 26 outs, and I hang a slider. The batter pops it up, and he knows it should have been a homer, and I know it could have been a homer but he popped it." The message: "It's better to be lucky than good."

That's how Seaver felt that day as he and Nancy cut a path through the brush. They didn't know if there was a level spot where they might build or plant. Tom loved gardening, but didn't know anything about planting a vineyard. As he climbed up a tree to survey the property, he saw the vista: a stunning panorama of Napa Valley and the Vaca Mountains due east. That cinched it.

Luck continued. They found that flat area and built a house, which they started in 1998 and finished two years later. And on the first drilling, they

tapped water, the one essential for farming in the area, and for maintaining the lush gardens that surround their modern, split-level home. Eventually, Seaver discovered a gentle south-facing slope, hidden by hundreds of oak, madrone and Douglas fir trees and thick scrub. By then he had read enough books on vineyards to know that in the mountainous terrain at the north end of the valley near Calistoga, he needed a site with a southern exposure.

Jim Barbour, Seaver's vineyard manager, remembers when he first learned of the Diamond Mountain site. "We were looking at a whole other area to plant," says Barbour, "and then one day [Tom] called and said he'd found another site. It was here all the time, but it was covered with trees and brush."

One aspect of the project, though, hit a snag. Seaver was hoping for a spot hot enough to grow what had become his favorite grape: Zinfandel. A wine lover since his late 20s, he'd eventually built up two nice cellars, anchored initially with first-growth Bordeaux. "I was a beer drinker going back to college, but with a little maturity I learned to like wine," he says. "Wine just fascinated me. The learning curve is fascinating. I don't have a great palate. I just wanted to educate myself."

His tastes veered toward Zinfandel. (Nancy preferred Chardonnay.) He was attracted to the pepper and spice accents prevalent in the hearty red. One Zin in particular, Outpost, had become a favorite. Outpost produced a Howell Mountain version that Seaver loved, and he figured that if Zin worked on Howell Mountain then it would flourish on the other side, his side, of the valley, too.

When Seaver hired Barbour, in 2000, the vineyard expert quickly laid out the facts: You don't grow Zinfandel on Diamond Mountain. It was Cabernet country, best known as home to Diamond Creek and its long-lived Cabs, along with a dozen other top vineyards. It didn't take long for Barbour to sway Seaver. With 32 years of developing mostly Cabernet vineyards in the

valley, Barbour, a top-flight Cabernet producer in his own right, can just look at some sites and know they're sweet spots for Napa's star red.

"I'm a Cab guy," Barbour told Seaver. "This is an area where Cab has proven itself. If people are going to spend that much money to develop a vineyard, why not get the best bang for your buck?"

For his winemaker, Seaver interviewed half-a-dozen candidates before finding the right chemistry with Thomas Brown, whom he hired as the 2005 crop ripened. He knew Brown by his wines, especially those he made at Outpost, and the two men hit it off immediately. The Seavers had their team in place: A vineyard guru, a star winemaker, a place to make wine. They'd move into Outpost, the custom-crush facility near Angwin on Howell Mountain, where Brown and others made dozens of different wines in what's considered a winery co-op. Seaver would be the general manager and oversee grunt work in the vineyard, a casual three-minute stroll from his home and a trek he made daily accompanied by his three Labrador retrievers: Bandy, Brix and Major. He was loving it.

George Thomas Seaver was born in 1944 in Fresno, Calif., in the hub of the San Joaquin Valley's endless stretch of farmlands. The youngest of four children, he showed an aptitude early on for sports, and for baseball in particular, pitching a perfect game as a Little Leaguer. He had a stellar 20-year career in the majors. Pitching for the New York Mets, he was chosen as National League Rookie of the Year in 1967 and later earned the nickname "Tom Terrific" for leading the "Miracle Mets" to their first World Series title in 1969. The list of accolades is long and impressive. He became known as "The Franchise."

Seaver pitched for four teams over the course of his career. He was known for his tenacity and accuracy and for his powerful legs and right arm, with an over-the-top delivery and array of tough-to-hit pitches. He could also swing the bat, hitting 12 home runs and, he notes with a measure of pride, was a perfect 3-for-3 stealing bases. He recorded 311 wins, 3,640

strikeouts, 61 shutouts and a 2.86 earned run average, winning three Cy Young Awards as the league's best pitcher. In 1992, he was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame by the highest percentage ever recorded (98.84), and he has the only plaque at Cooperstown adorned with a New York Mets cap.

The modest-sized office in his home displays sports memorabilia, trophies, bats, balls, score sheets and photographs. Along with books on baseball, there are shelves devoted to grapegrowing and history. One trophy means as much to him as any of his awards: He's a member of the United States Marine Corps Sports Hall of Fame. Seaver credits his six-month stint in the reserves, after his high school graduation in 1963, with helping him mature and instilling the toughness, determination, team spirit and never-say-die attitude that he carried throughout his career.

"I was not a very good student," he recalls, seated behind the small desk in his office, reflecting on how his life evolved. "If I didn't have a ball, I didn't care." After high school, his father suggested the Marines. "I was a late developer physically as well," he adds. "But the disciplines I learned [in the Marines], I took to the mound."

These days, striding to the mound means hiking to his vineyard, its soils a mix of chalk-gray volcanic rock, a dusty earth that Barbour calls "moon dust." Seaver navigates it carefully. One knee likes hiking less than the other.

"When I hired Thomas Brown, that is, when he agreed to work for me, I said, 'Here's your marching orders, this is what I want you to do,'" says Seaver, putting on his game face, stare-down-the-batter look and sounding like a sergeant. "One, I want you to make the best wine you can. Two, goodbye."

"The whole process, as far as I knew it, fascinated me," says Seaver. "How does it happen? How it gets from a grape, a plant, into the bottle is the journey that's exciting. Once you get over the mystique, it becomes a

physical matter."

"Tom's easily the most hands-on owner I deal with when it comes to the vineyard," says Brown, who makes wine for more than a dozen brands, including his own Rivers-Marie label. "It sounds like hyperbole, but he really is out there every day. With the vineyard being only 3.5 acres, I don't doubt Tom has a personal relationship with every vine out there."

When working with Diamond Mountain grapes, most of the focus in the vineyard is ripening tannin, says Brown. "We tend to leave as much fruit out there as possible early on to maximize hang time for flavor and tannin development." Then comes the thinning, a second, heavier, pass that usually occurs at 95 percent veraison, says Brown, and which is a much greater bloodletting. Dropping up to half your crop is a painful process for a vintner who is close to his vines.

"The day after the grapes were picked, I couldn't believe they were gone," Seaver says. It was traumatic. "You nurture them, you fuss over them, you do all these things, and suddenly it's all over."

GTS is a rich, robust red, with deft balance, intensity, power and finesse. Pure and dense, it showcases Brown's ability to achieve a wine of immense flavor dimension, polished tannins and subtlety, even in an appellation where wines tend to be leaner and more linear, and tannic, too. "The wines come across as pretty spicy to me," says Brown, "with a nice mix of fruit across the whole color spectrum. The tannins are abundant in quantity but come across as soft and non-intrusive. Color and concentration are never an issue with the [GTS] wines."

The GTS vineyard is capable of producing about 250 cases a year, with yields of 2 to 3 tons of grapes per acre. Many of Seaver's former teammates, and rivals, be it Sandy Koufax, Bob Gibson or Hank Aaron, value the wine, the man and the visit. Just after this year's All-Star game, San Francisco Giants manager Bruce Bochy spent a rare day off with the Seavers, sitting on their deck, taking in the view.

Brown enjoys the times when the banter is about baseball. "Growing up in South Carolina, the [Atlanta] Braves were the closest thing we had to a hometown team," Brown says, "and I spent many summer evenings winding the day down watching Aaron swing the bat and eventually break the home run record."

Seaver himself gets the most satisfaction from working the vineyard. "From that position, living the dream, doing what you like to do is a phenomenal feeling," he says.

It's not perfect, though. Seaver is fighting Lyme disease and memory loss, and doesn't drink any wine, not even his own, because of the medication he takes to combat Lyme disease. In 1991, he was infected by a tick while working in his garden; the disease remained dormant in his system for two decades only to resurface two years ago.

"It's a disease you never get rid of," he says with a straight stare. The result is that he has good days and bad days. "The bad days are just like flu, and your brain doesn't work," he says. There are times when he struggles to remember names and faces of people he's known for years. One of his greatest fears was a loss of memory of all the great years in baseball. He now takes a battery of pills, mostly vitamins, and his mental acuity has been improving since his treatment for Stage 3 Lyme disease began.

Seaver shouts from his office, "Nancy, Nancy Lynn, yo, honey, come on down here," and eventually she hears him and comes downstairs from her office to join the conversation and help complete the couple's timeline for this story. Seaver asks her to fill in some of the details of their journey. He's having a good day today; she has a better memory. Later, when I call him to talk about the toughest hitter he faced, he talks about many showdowns but chooses Willie McCovey, the towering left-handed slugger for the San Francisco Giants, from a list that included all the stars of the era, including Willie Mays, Hank Aaron and Roberto Clemente.

Next we're off to the vineyard, Tom and Nancy wearing floppy wide-brim

hats to shield the sun. "If you don't put your heart in it, you won't learn," says Seaver. What he's learned so far is this is exactly the journey he hoped he'd find years ago when he wanted to redirect his life and invent a new Tom Seaver. "It was a good excuse to come to the valley," he laughs. "Nancy placated me and thought I'd get over it."

He didn't and hasn't. The wine game is still in the early innings. There's still a lot to learn and plenty of vintages ahead.