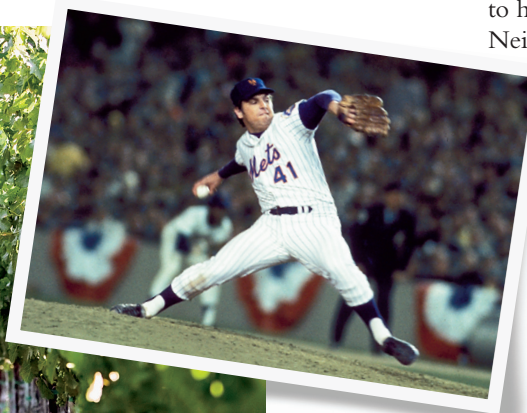


Joining the Big Leagues

One of baseball's all-time pitching greats, Tom Seaver, is a rising star in the competitive fields of Napa Valley. **BY RAY ISLE**



His own private Napa: Tom Seaver in the vineyard with his dogs and pitching for the Mets in the early seventies

For a lot of sports legends, life after the lights can be humbling. What do you do when the mojo's gone, the knees hurt, and you're no longer hurling 90-mph fastballs? Hall of Fame pitcher Tom Seaver evidently approached the question the way he always approached baseball, which is to say, thoughtfully.

"I was twenty-eight years old, in the middle of this great career, and I remember my brother-in-law asking 'What will you do when you're done?' And I said 'I'll go back to California and grow grapes.' My response was spontaneous, but I never stopped thinking about it."

That great career was the one where he was known as Tom Terrific: 3,640 career strikeouts, 311 career wins, three Cy Young awards, elected to Cooperstown with the highest percentage of votes ever. He was pretty much the greatest player in New York Mets history, the star of the "miracle" 1969 championship team. We're talking one of the finest technicians to ever throw a baseball, the guy about whom Reggie Jackson famously said "Blind men come to the park just to hear him pitch."

But that was a long time ago, and Seaver, following through on his post-baseball dream, now spends his days tending Cabernet Sauvignon grapes high atop Diamond Mountain, on Napa Valley's western rim. Perfect Cabernet land, GTS Vineyards (for George Thomas Seaver, his given name) is a small site—just three and a half acres—and Seaver only makes around 450 cases of two wines total. His flagship GTS Cabernet Sauvignon is intense and brawny, with luscious black cherry fruit bulwarked by muscular tannins. It's also fairly expensive, as one would expect from such small production, at \$85 per bottle. His second wine, Nancy's Fancy, is a lighter, more fruit-forward Cab, priced \$20 less. The 2007s, the third release of each, benefited from one of Napa's best Cabernet vintages in years.

Grape growing, it turns out, wasn't unknown to Seaver.

His father was in the dried fruit business in Fresno, California—raisins, in other words. More important was inheriting a disinclination to just sit around. "I think it's a gene," he says. "My dad was the same way."

While most celebrities who attach their names to wines—there are plenty, from other sports figures such as Arnold Palmer to heavy-metal rockers such as Vince Neil—are marginally hands-on at best,

Seaver is in the vineyard every day. "I'm working my rear end off and loving every minute of it," he says. "During harvest I'm here when the crew arrives, at six A.M., cup of coffee in hand."

Baseball or wine, one doesn't succeed without a great team, and Seaver was smart enough to hire esteemed vineyard manager Jim Barbour and winemaker Thomas Brown, both of whom consult on some of Napa's most sought-after wines. (Seaver tells the story of how he cemented his partnership with Barbour with a strategic gift—a bottle of Cabernet autographed by fellow wine-loving Hall of Famers like Rollie Fingers, Steve Carlton, Don Sutton, and Bob Gibson.) The other key players at GTS are Seaver's niece, Karen, who serves as business manager, and his wife of 43 years, Nancy.

The couple live on their vineyard property in a sleek contemporary home

designed by Kenneth Kao, a Boston architect and a friend. It's a beautiful place that merges with the landscape and doesn't radiate cash or ego the way many Napa homes do. Sitting at the kitchen table tasting the 2007 GTS wines, we've got spectacular views of northern Napa Valley, with Mount St. Helena looming in the distance. When Seaver bought the land, in 1998, it was still covered with trees.

"I wasn't blind," he says. "I knew what a south-facing slope up here meant. Bingo—lottery winner. I don't know how a piece of property like this could have still existed." Seaver looks at the wine in his glass. "Sometimes I shake my head and ask myself, How the hell did you do this?"

GTS VINEYARDS

THE WINES

Tom Seaver's vineyard isn't open to the public, but his powerful flagship GTS Cabernet Sauvignon (\$85) and easier-drinking GTS Nancy's Fancy Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65) are available in limited quantities using order forms at seaverfamilyvineyards.com. The wines can also be found at the Calistoga Wine Stop (707-942-5556; calistogawinestop.net) and the St. Helena Wine Center (707-963-1313; shwc.com).

