

THE FRENCH LAUNDRY

Thomas Keller's Napa Valley icon reopens with a stellar new wine list



BY HARVEY STEIMAN

BEFORE CHEF-OWNER THOMAS KELLER CLOSED the French Laundry in 2004 for remodeling, the Napa Valley restaurant had only a tiny wine cellar plus some off-site storage. Keller barely had room to accommodate a 550-selection wine list—not a bad size, but hardly in keeping with the restaurant's exalted reputation for dining.

"I had to be in New York to get *Per Se* going," Keller recalls, "so it seemed like a good time to expand the kitchen at French Laundry and, while we were at it, add some wine storage."

Mission accomplished. As of the Restaurant Awards entry deadline earlier this year, the French Laundry offered a wine list of 1,800 labels, backed by an inventory of 12,500 bottles (those numbers have since increased). Two new wine cellars on-site house the bottles needed for daily use. A 2,000-bottle "cellar du jour" was built around a tree and opens onto the space between the dining room and kitchen. Around back, storage for 6,500 bottles holds backups. The rest are kept at Vintrust, a nearby storage facility with next-day delivery.

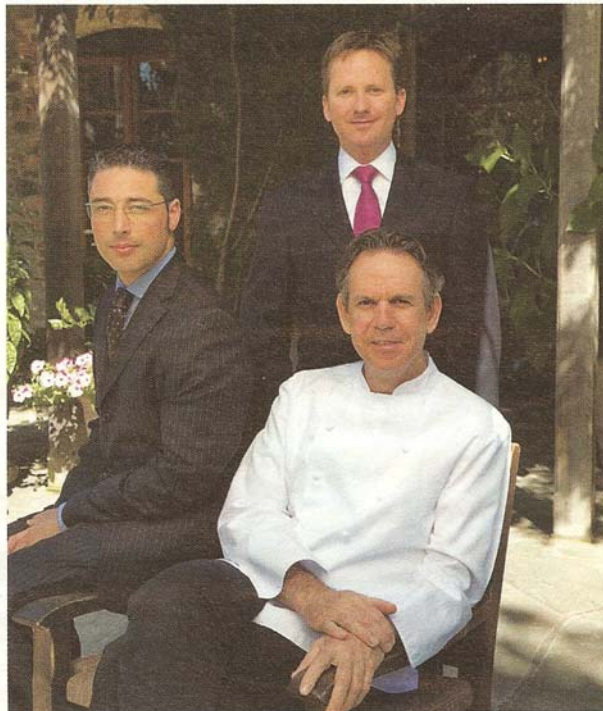
Texan Paul Roberts left *Cafe Annie* in Houston in 2003 to join up with Keller as wine director. He's now in charge of all of Keller's restaurants, which include *Per Se* in New York and *Bouchon* in Napa Valley and Las Vegas. Roberts has filled the French Laundry's new cellar with the blue-chip bottlings from France and California that he quickly learned Keller's customers want.

Bordeaux first-growth verticals focus on the best vintages, including 1996, 1995, 1990, 1986, 1982 and 1961. The roster of Burgundies offers several wines each from top producers such as François Raveneau, Coche-Dury, Comtes Lafon, Louis Carillon, Leflaive, Joseph Roty, Henri Jayer, Emmanuel Rouget and Romanée-Conti.

The California Cabernet section has verticals of Joseph Phelps Insignia dating to 1977 (\$1,000), Beaulieu Vineyard Georges de Latour to 1969 (\$785), Bryant Family to 1992 (\$2,900), Colgin to 1992 (Herb Lamb Vineyard, \$2,100) and Shafer Hillside Select to 1987 (\$630). Yet the focus is more on recent vintages from wineries such as Bond, Hewitt, Paul Hobbs, Hollywood & Vine, Hundred Acre, Kapcsandy Family, Kobalt, Merus, Ramey and Sloan Family.

"People come to Napa Valley to experience new California wines," says Roberts. "Older California bottles actually sell better at *Per Se*. Here, instead of long verticals, we want more diversity. The menu changes often, and we like to move to another producer to get the flavors we want in a wine to go with a new dish."

Wine prices may seem high, but Roberts' markup formula is comparable to that of many other high-end lists, and includes (as do the menu prices) a 20 percent service charge in lieu of a tip. Sommelier Gregory Castells pleases value-seekers by featuring "highly recommended" wines in each section of the list, many at \$100 or less, and



The highly selective wine program at the French Laundry—overseen by sommelier Gregory Castells (left), wine director Paul Roberts and chef-owner Thomas Keller—offers both depth and diversity, with many new wines and rare bottlings.

intrepid diners can explore obscure gems such as Txomin Etxaniz Hondarrabi 2004 (\$45) from Spain and Biblia Chora Areti 2002 (\$70) from Greece. There are also 180 half-bottles available, including almost 50 at \$75 or less.

Castells and Roberts devise wine pairings for the French Laundry's menus, which often contain more than a dozen courses. "We don't have a set pairing for everyone," Roberts explains. "We ask our guests if they really want a different wine with each course, for example, or if they want to focus on two or three."

Sets of pairings usually start at \$175, but often end up costing \$250, about the same price as the dinner menu. "Several times a week someone will want to spend \$1,000 per person," Roberts adds. "That gives us some scope." The big, broad wine list helps too.

The French Laundry

6640 Washington St., Yountville, Calif. Telephone (707) 944-2380 Web site www.frenchlaundry.com Wine selections 1,795 Number of bottles 12,500