

Chef Talk: Douglas Keane This young Sonoma-based chef has created a world-class restaurant in wine country

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Chef Douglas Keane, age 36, is the executive chef and co-owner of Cyrus, a Wine Spectator Best of Award of Excellence winner in Healdsburg, Calif. Keane is a graduate of Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, and spent time in the kitchens of the Four Seasons and Lespinasse in New York, and Jardinière and the Grand Award-winning Gary Danko in San Francisco. It was at Gary Danko that Keane met Nick Peyton, who is now his partner at Cyrus and the more casual Market, in St. Helena. In 2006, the pair earned two Michelin stars for Cyrus, which Keane calls his "dream restaurant."

Wine Spectator: How did you come to be interested in wine?

Douglas Keane: It was just being around this business ... as a cook, you sit there as someone who's on the outside, and say, "OK, I need to put the Budweiser down and figure out what wine tastes like." And then it was kind of eye-opening. Usually you're first introduced to these big California Chards and Cabs, and none of those really did it for me. Then I started tasting some Austrian wines and some German wines, and Burgundy, and I was like, "I get this."

WS: What part of your career was this?

DK: When I got to New York, after college. I took some wine classes in college, but ... I had no palate at that point. It was the moment I got down to New York and started to eat out more that I started learning about wine.

WS: Where did you get your start in New York?

DK: I was at the Four Seasons restaurant. They would do these huge wine dinners occasionally. They would bring in these Bordeaux producers or Burgundy producers ... and there would always be a ton of wine left over [laughing].

WS: Tell us about Market, your first joint venture with Nick Peyton.

DK: We started working on Cyrus, and realized how long it was going to take to build it. ... In the meantime, a space over in St. Helena opened up. St. Helena's got a bunch of high-end restaurants, and there was no one doing casual food at the time. ... We were trying to fill a niche. It has a world wine list, but with a pretty high concentration of Napa wines, because it's a neighborhood restaurant. ... Everything is priced \$14 above retail and we charge \$15 for corkage, so we give you a dollar incentive to buy our wine. That seems to work out.

WS: And what about Cyrus?

DK: With Cyrus, we wanted to try to elevate ourselves to compete on the world-class level, and we thought Sonoma was ready for it. ... A lot of people thought we were nuts, but Charlie Palmer was nuts first. [Laughing] ... We're not trying to reinvent the wheel like he did. Plus, for us, [fine dining] was what we were used to doing. Market was a very hard opening for me. I didn't know how to cook that food. I had to research it in trial and error.

WS: What do you mean by "that food"?

DK: American comfort food. Yeah, I can make meat loaf at home, but it's different to produce 40 portions and try to pick it up in three minutes. ... It's hard to switch your style. Cyrus felt natural, and we already knew what we were doing.

WS: Describe the wine program at Cyrus.

DK: We didn't want to do a Sonoma County list. We wanted to pay a lot of respect to Sonoma County ... but we decided that if we were going to compete on a world-class level, then we were going to showcase Sonoma County's world-class wines, along with whatever else we could find in the country and in the world. The interesting thing is, my food doesn't pair that well with California wines. [Laughing] It leans more toward higher-acid whites and reds. ... We've had a little struggle at times with people saying, "I came up here for Sonoma wines." We can do that if you tell us that's what you want, but I come up with the dish and [sommelier] Jim [Rollston] picks the wine to complement it, and it's often not a Sonoma wine. It's more likely to be from Germany or Austria, or an Alsatian wine. Right now he's pouring a sherry with chorizo and clam broth. And I was doing a dried scallop and shiitake mushroom broth with sea bream and pickled watermelon. It was a real earthy dish, and he poured sake against it, and the pairing was absolutely great.

WS: Cyrus was awarded two Michelin stars in November 2006. What was that experience like for you, and did it affect your business?

DK: [Michelin president] Jean-Luc Naret's assistant had sent this cryptic e-mail before the stars were announced, saying that Jean-Luc wanted to talk to me on a certain date and at a certain time. I was picking Nick up, we were going down to [San Francisco] for the Michelin party. It was funny—Nick's daughter was showing me this huge blow-up Halloween pumpkin that had a motor ... she started it and then the phone rang and it was Jean-Luc Naret, and I couldn't understand his accent that well, and the motor was loud, and he said something, and then he said, "Congratulations!" I had to ask him to repeat himself and he said, "Two stars." I was kind of overjoyed, but then I said, "Who got three?" [Laughing] ... When we opened this restaurant, the last thing we ever worried about was Michelin. ... Four stars from the [San Francisco] Chronicle, that was our main goal. But yeah, it did have an effect on business. This winter was a lot better than the last winter. The summer was great, and the fall is great no matter what. You could put a taco stand that wasn't very good up here in October and still hit a home run, because there are just so many people here.

WS: What wines do you like to drink?

DK: I love rosés, especially in hot weather, but I'll drink them all year 'round. I'll drink a lot more white than red, and I'm somewhat addicted to Champagne and sparkling wine. ... There are some great local rosés—Iron Horse, Tin Roof. ... Bonaccorsi Pink Monkey is great. We pour that by the glass sometimes. For sparkling ... I don't remember the vintage, but I drank some vintage Pol Roger in New York that was incredible. If I feel like spending a lot I'll drink Laurent Perrier. I drink a lot of Iron Horse and a lot of J. I recently got to taste some Agrapart. I just think Champagne and sparkling wine are magical when they work.

WS: Running a restaurant in Sonoma, you must host a number of winemakers. How do you handle the issue of corkage?

DK: It's a huge hot topic. ... We charge \$35 corkage fee per bottle. And we treat it like it's one of our bottles. ... We show it the respect it deserves and we don't pass any judgment. On Wednesday nights, we do corkage free in the dining room, one bottle per couple. And in the bar we don't charge corkage, ever, as long as they're eating. If they just come in and open a bottle then, it's like, "You gotta get out of the chair, pal." [Laughing] Inevitably, people will complain. ... The truth is, if we didn't charge for corkage, we'd have to raise our prices for food, and we'd have to charge more on our wine list. So in essence we'd be penalizing the people who actually buy our wine, which doesn't make a lot of sense. ... Sometimes winemakers are the coolest about it ... and sometimes they're the biggest pains in the ass about it. It's like, "I don't go to your winery and ask for free wine. I patronize you guys, I put your wines on the list, and I'm sorry, I gotta make money here."