

## Jaffe Estate Winery

Here's a wine that can make you see stars



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[FEATURES EDITOR](#)

Gary Jaffe discovered astronomy when he was 9 years old and a favorite uncle took him to the planetarium at Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles.

He got his first taste of wine not long after, in one of those sips sneaked from the grown-ups' bottle.

Several decades intervened before Jaffe could unite both interests. Along the way, the Southern California businessman had also discovered the

Napa Valley.

He and his wife, Pam, recounted the story as they sat on the verandah of their St. Helena home, which looks out on one of the more unusual views in town — no, not the vineyards, but the silver-domed observatory that sits among them.

Jaffe studied economics at UCLA, but “whenever I could I took astronomy classes.” He went into the family insurance business. Then, in 1980, he first visited St. Helena. “I decided I’d live here one day,” he said.

Soon he was heading up to St. Helena on a monthly basis and he realized that for what he was spending on hotels, “I could buy a piece of land.”

His first property was 8 acres on Pritchard Hill above Lake Hennessey, where he had a cabin, that was a fine place to set up a telescope and watch the stars. “If Gallileo had lived in LA he would have been a CPA,” he said.

A few years later he doubled his land holdings and began to think about planting grapes. The estimate to plant on the rocky site, however, was about \$100,000 per acre in 1991.

About the same time, Gary was taking a class on the art of collecting at UCLA where he met his future wife, Pam. “I decided to collect her,” he quipped. “She’s my kind of art.”

Gary and Pam moved to the valley full time in 1999 but with the addition of twin girls into their lives, the distance to town began to diminish the appeal of living at the solitary mountain site.

Instead, Gary and Pam found 3 acres and a house at the southern edge of the St. Helena appellation — at the edge of the Rutherford bench. “Everything grows here,” Pam said.

Merlot and cabernet sauvignon grapes had been growing on the site since the 1970s. The Jaffes renovated the house, adding the deep verandah that looks west to the nearby

Mayacamas Mountains. “It was the culmination of a longtime dream,” Gary said, especially when he added the observatory that housed a 16-inch aperture optical telescope.

“I was a little shocked when I saw the dome arriving,” Pam said.

The new Jaffe Estate Winery also began producing two estate-grown wines. Transformation is a Bordeaux blend, and Metamorphosis is a cab. “We’re all about change,” Gary explained.

Mike Neal is the vineyard manager. To make the wine, the Jaffes turned to David DeSante after they found themselves both ranking his wines first, again and again, in blind tastings. “We wanted to make the kind of wines we like to drink,” Pam said, “and we both liked David’s wines best.”

DeSante had been on his way to becoming a doctor when he decided to enroll in UC Davis’ viticulture and enology programs. He had worked at Robert Mondavi Winery and then in Australia’s Margaret River region before returning to Napa, where he began crafting cabernet at S. Anderson winery, then known for its sparkling wines.

Today, De Sante makes wines under his own label, in addition to blending the Jaffes’ balanced and elegant, relatively low-alcohol reds.

“David is very true to the vineyard,” Pam said.

With a background in design, Pam is behind the label, which depicts in changing colors, the transformation, as it were, of grapes. It also calls to mind, however, those charts of the phases of the moon.

The first vintage released was 2005 — and Gary said it was a proud moment for them when Auberge du Soleil promptly added their wines to its highly selective list.

The astronomy connection keeps growing, too. The Jaffes often host local school groups, who come for star-gazing sessions. And more than a few astronomers have visited the site as well, including Phil Plait, the creator of Bad Astronomy, which critiques the misuses of science. Scientists from the Keck Observatory, tasting Jaffe wines, were inspired enough to make them the observatory’s official wine.

“I spend a lot of time out in the observatory,” Gary said. “I’m not adverse to getting up at 3 a.m. to scan the cosmos.”

Looking at the stars, he said, “puts life on earth into perspective.

“But sometimes,” he admitted, “I drink wine and see stars without the telescope.”

Jaffe wines are on the lists at local restaurants, including Ad Hoc, Auberge du Soleil, Mustards Grill and Cindy’s Backstreet Kitchen. They are also available through the Web site, [www.jaffeestate.com](http://www.jaffeestate.com).

For more information about the wines or the observatory, call the Jaffe Estate Winery office, 967-9146.