



▲ Figure. Dr. Thompson and his wife, Jana, at their Handwritten wine tasting room.

JESSUP CELLARS



Pairing South Dakota hospitality with Napa Valley wine.

BY VANCE THOMPSON, MD, FACS

My journey into wine making began about 25 years ago, when one of my best friends from medical school, Dan Blue, MD, and his wife, Becky, met a distant relative at a family reunion in South Dakota. Their relative happened to be married to a wine maker in Napa Valley, and, after the three of them hit it off at the reunion, she invited Dan and Becky out to Napa Valley for a visit. They in turn invited my wife, Jana, and me to come along.

This trip to Napa Valley became an annual tradition, and I loved it. Both of my parents were gourmet chefs, and they taught my siblings and me

a lot about food and wine. It was great to experience during these trips to Napa Valley some of what my parents taught me growing up.

TAKING ON JESSUP CELLARS

Several years into our Napa Valley tradition, the couple who owned the winery ran into financial difficulties and requested our help. Dan and I ended up lending them the money to help out their wine business because we really cared about them. Unfortunately, they weren't able to keep the business running and declared bankruptcy. In bankruptcy court, my friend and

I were awarded the assets of their wine business, and we had to make a decision: Sell the assets or go forward with owning the business? We chose the latter and asked a previous owner and dear friend, Roy Eisiminger, to team up with us and help us take this alien business forward.

INSPIRED BY OPHTHALMIC PRACTICE

When we started training staff, I took the same slides and teaching materials that I use for my practice staff in South Dakota, crossed out the word eyes and replaced it with

“MY BELIEF IS THAT YOU GROW YOUR BUSINESS BY CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE OF FAMILY. THAT’S HOW I’VE GROWN VANCE THOMPSON VISION, AND THAT’S HOW WE’VE GROWN JESSUP CELLARS.”

the word *wine*, and started teaching retreats on how we (the new leadership) would expect members of the team to treat customers and each other. We began to cultivate a culture of kindness and caring for each other—in exactly the same way we do in our practices.

This really resonated with our customers. We had three people in our wine club back then, and two of them were my partner and me. Now we have thousands of people in our wine club, and I attribute that to our caring environment. Jessup Cellars was named the friendliest, most knowledgeable tasting room in the Napa Valley 4 years ago and has repeated the honor every year since. We were even able to build on our success by starting a second wine business—Handwritten Wines (Figure)—11 years ago.

It was fun to see some of the things that we do in the practice of medicine—building a team culture and excellent patient experience—enhance a wine business, too. What I’ve learned in the wine business has also helped me on the hospitality side of the eye care business.

EXTENDED FAMILY OF OPHTHALMOLOGY

One aspect of my journey in the wine business that has been amazing to me is how much the extended family of ophthalmology has supported me. So many people from ophthalmology were interested in the winery. They’d come visit the place,

join our wine club, and even include our wines in their corporate events.

I’ve always felt that the network in ophthalmology is an extended work family. This notion became tangible for me when Jim Mazzo (the long-time industry figure who recently retired as CEO of Carl Zeiss Meditec) became my partner. Most recently, Eric D. Donnenfeld, MD, and Kerry D. Solomon, MD, also joined us as investors and have been great advocates, ambassadors, and owners in our business. It’s been really neat to see the world of ophthalmology help me not only to better enjoy this journey but also to continue on with it.

CREATING A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

The part of my work that I really enjoy—whether in ophthalmology or in wine—is figuring out how to touch people deeply through their experiences with us. It’s not about the wine, in the same way that it’s not about the eye surgery in ophthalmology. If you really want to have a great impact on people, it’s all about the experience that you create around them and for them. They’ve come to you expecting something—whether that’s good wine or help in seeing better—but if you’re going to touch them deeply, it’s about the experience, how you make them feel.

My belief is that you grow your business by creating an environment and culture of family. That’s how I’ve grown Vance Thompson Vision, and that’s how we’ve grown Jessup Cellars.

When our customers see our staff members treating their coworkers with the same care and kindness they are experiencing, and when they are made to feel a part of the family, they are more likely to become loyal customers.

That’s what grows your eye business, and that’s what grows your wine business. Make your customers think, “I don’t know if I’ve ever been in a business that has made me feel this special. Not only do I want to trust them with my eye surgery, not only do I want to be a part of their wine club, but I also want to tell my friends.”

This kind of culture becomes your marketing, and it also is simply good business.

FINDING BALANCE

Balance is achieved through hiring and trusting the right people. It’s about the power of people. I couldn’t possibly do it on my own. If you have great people and great support systems in place, you can do a lot more than you thought you could.

My priority is ophthalmology. I love being a doctor, I love the practice of ophthalmology, and I love my emphasis on refractive surgery and refractive cataract surgery. I do a lot of teaching, writing, and research, but having Jessup Cellars and other passions outside of ophthalmology brings a different perspective to my life. It’s important, if you want to be great at something, to have other things in your life that represent fun and that are interesting to you. The fact that I have found things away from ophthalmology that bring a fun and interesting dimension to my life is one the biggest reasons why I have so much love for ophthalmology. ■

VANCE THOMPSON, MD, FACS

- Founder, Vance Thompson Vision, Sioux Falls, South Dakota
- Member, *CRST* Executive Advisory Board
- vance.thompson@vancethompsonvision.com
- Financial disclosure: Owner (Jessup Cellars, Handwritten Wines)