
VANCE THOMPSON

MD

COMPANIES: Handwritten Wines and Jessup Cellars

CLINICAL PRACTICE: Vance Thompson Vision

CLAIM TO FAME: A multilocation practice owner and recognized leader in creating an exceptional patient/customer experience

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Dr. Thompson talks about his passion for wine, how it complements his practice, and the importance of a people-first philosophy in business.



“No matter what the business is, people-first philosophies are the foundation. ... I’ll tell my team, ‘I’m proud of our wine, but if we want to differentiate ourselves in this business, it’s going to be how we treat each other, which leads to how we treat the people who come through our doors.’”

CRST: You own Jessup Cellars, a Napa Valley winery and tasting gallery in Yountville, California. How did you get involved in the venture?

Vance Thompson, MD: My father was a small-town family physician in South Dakota. My mother was a professional interpretive dancer. She had quite a career and even danced in Hollywood on TV. She met my father at a bar in Sioux Falls. After they got married, she dedicated her life to her family. Both my mother and father loved food and wine and taught my siblings and me from a young age to respect wine as an extension of food.

A little more than 20 years ago, Dan Blue, MD, MBA, one of my best friends from medical school, and I bought Jessup Cellars out of bankruptcy. We were fascinated with the wine and food industry and attracted to Napa Valley in particular because of its amazing wine-growing characteristics. The warm days are important for developing the sugars in a wine grape, and the cool nights are important for developing the acidity. We soon added a third partner, Roy Eisiminger, who lives in the Napa Valley and is our boots on the ground.

CRST: What made you interested in pursuing a business opportunity outside of ophthalmology?

Dr. Thompson: I love being a refractive surgeon and taking good care of people, but I think it’s important to chase other dreams, too. The practice of medicine has its challenges, and having something else to focus on at times can carry me through the ups and downs. Being passionate about something outside of my main job has made both pursuits more enjoyable. I learn things from each business that

complement the other; it makes my journey more rewarding and enriching.

CRST: How involved are you in the business? Has this changed from when you first invested to now?

Dr. Thompson: I'm very involved. In 2009, we started Handwritten Wines. Vineyard property in Northern California is expensive. Jim Mazzo, well known in the field of ophthalmology, joined us in the venture and helped us purchase the vineyard. As our wine business grew, we needed other investors. Eric D. Donnenfeld, MD, and Kerry Solomon, MD, became partners.

Together, we are creating quality wine experiences at Jessup Cellars centered around the art of the blend. When you come into our tasting room, what are you seeing? We have beautiful art on the walls to enjoy. What are you smelling? The olfactory sense is 70% of wine tasting. What are you hearing? We want it to be an enjoyable but also educational atmosphere so that, when people leave, they feel like they connected not only with our team but also with our wines. It makes them more interested in joining our wine family, which we call a *wine club*.

The experiential aspect has been important, and it's the reason we started Handwritten Wines, which centers around cabernet. There are many soil types and microclimates in the Napa Valley, which makes for different wines. These vineyard sources are American viticulture areas. It's amazing the difference in the bold flavors that you get. We use old-fashioned manual wine-making techniques, which led to the name Handwritten Wines.

I put a lot of heart into the wine business. When I hand someone a bottle of my wine, I'm giving them a piece of myself. That is meaningful to me and, I think, for them.

CRST: There are similarities in the guiding principles for Vance Thompson Vision and Jessup Cellars. Both tout family, hard work, and the art of hospitality. What aspects of the winery business have you applied to the practice of medicine and vice versa?

Dr. Thompson: Dan and I noticed the impressive wealth involved in the Napa Valley wine industry. As a couple of doctors from South Dakota, we couldn't compete purely on money and needed to find another way to have an impact. I was already working hard in my practice to build a team culture to create a great patient experience. My mantra is that a team that loves and cares for each other will create an environment where the patient or customer feels loved and cared for. Patients don't write thank you notes for my 1,000-Hz femtosecond laser or a trifocal IOL. Yes, their vision is important, but to tell you the truth, the thank you notes I get are mainly about how we made them feel.

No matter what the business is, people-first philosophies are the foundation. Some of the world's best wines are in the Napa Valley. I'll tell my team, "I'm proud of our wine, but if we want to differentiate ourselves in this business, it's going to be how we treat each other, which leads to how we treat the people who come through our doors." As a result, The Jessup Cellars Tasting Gallery has been named the friendliest and most knowledgeable tasting room in the Napa Valley for the past 5 years.

CRST: What's been the most unexpected learning opportunity you've experienced in the wine business?

Dr. Thompson: Even though I was brought up to respect food and wine, entering the Napa Valley wine culture and getting to know the winery owners, wine makers, and experts in the business was intimidating. What's been most unexpected is having the people I respect in the Napa Valley come study the Vance Thompson Vision ways, take the courses we have our team take on the customer experience and team culture building, buy the same books, ask for advice, and invite me to speak to their teams. The people part of the journey is what means the most to them also. That has been rewarding.

CRST: What advice would you give someone interested in starting or investing in a company outside of ophthalmology?

Dr. Thompson: If you're looking to get involved with businesses outside of your main business, do it for more than just extra money. It's hard to become an expert at something you don't enjoy. Choose something you're passionate about and that's fun—something that can make your life's journey more enriching. ■

VANCE THOMPSON, MD

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- Financial disclosure: Owner (Handwritten Wines, Jessup Cellars)