



RAM'S GATE
WINERY · SONOMA

Joe Nielsen

DIRECTOR OF WINEMAKING



As Director of Winemaking at Ram's Gate Winery, Joe Nielsen approaches winemaking with an unrivaled attention to detail and precision. Not only creative and compelling, he crafts wines that embody balance, verve and effortless elegance. Joe thrives on digging into a vineyard and finding out what makes it special. It is this spirit that drew him to Ram's Gate where the estate vineyard is uniquely positioned—the Sonoma Valley ends on the south-side of the vineyard, the Sonoma Coast on the east, and Carneros on the west, making it the compass rose of Sonoma and the gateway to Wine Country.

Joe got his start in winemaking in an unexpected place: the backyard of his parents' home in Lansing, Michigan. In 2003, Joe enrolled at Michigan State University with the intention of following in his parent's footsteps and studying pre-med but soon after he started the school introduced an exploratory winemaking program, which sparked Joe's interest. However, because he was underage, he was not permitted to apply.

Undeterred, he began researching viticulture on his own and, with his parents' blessing, planted an experimental vineyard in their 20-acre backyard. Joe continued to lobby for entrance to the university's winemaking program, and impressed by his perseverance, the faculty eventually granted his request. In 2007, Joe graduated from the program with a B.S. in Horticulture and accepted a position as winemaking assistant at Black Star Farms in Northern Michigan.

In 2008, Joe relocated to California for an internship at Merryvale Vineyards in Napa Valley where he spent a year learning every aspect of the winemaking business. In 2009, at just 23 years old, he became cellar master at Donelan Family Wines in Santa Rosa. Impressing their team with his passion and thirst for knowledge he was quickly promoted to assistant winemaker before becoming head winemaker in 2013 where he expanded the winery's Pinot Noir and Chardonnay programs. During this time, he also earned his Executive Wine MBA from Sonoma State University.

In 2018, Joe became director of winemaking at Ram's Gate and spent his first year focused on digging into what makes the Ram's Gate estate special. "Coming to Ram's Gate, I feel like I've been given a pile of gold and silver and they're asking me to make jewelry," says Joe. "I have everything I need to make great wines that are complete, complex and compelling."

He doubled down on holistic farming, diagrammed vineyard soils and used pressure bombs to study its water needs, subsequently reducing water use by nearly 33%. Joe believes that being thoughtful with land management will lead to not only better wines, but an even better place for

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— WINERY · SONOMA —

guests to visit and enjoy the fruits of his labor. He is now driving the estate to a more sustainable future, with the goal of being 100% organic in the next five years.

Joe is inspired by old California wines, which drives him towards finding wines that capture a sense of timelessness. He strives to balance just the right amount of acid, tannin, richness and body, without pulling too much in one direction or the other. During his time at Ram's Gate, he has introduced a variety of practices including native fermentation, whole cluster fermentation, and new partnerships with small-production, family-owned coopers, while also launching a new single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Sonoma Coast Rosé, and the Cellar Note series.

Joe's inherent desire for hands-on learning keeps him involved in local wine tasting groups and keeps his passport full of stamps from some of the world's best wine regions. He lives in Santa Rosa with his wife and two children and spends his free time enjoying Sonoma County's great outdoors and pursuing his passion for gardening.