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The French Laundry.
PHOTO: MICHAEL GRIMM

Chef Thomas Keller Dishes on Napa Valley's Hidden Gems

The chef, author, and restaurateur is celebrating 30 years of his Yountville landmark, The French Laundry

BY [CHRISTINA OHLY EVANS](#)



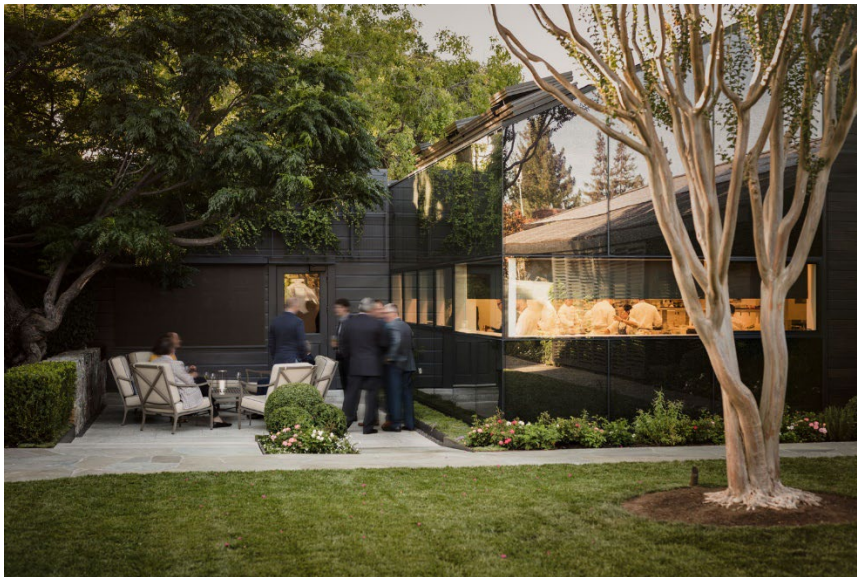
Chef Thomas Keller. PHOTO: DEBORAH JONES

The first and only US-chef to hold multiple Michelin three-star ratings, Thomas Keller has been at the forefront of farm-fresh Cali-French cuisine in the Napa Valley for the past three decades. His nine-course menus and almost-impossible-to-book tables have maintained their cherished status among gastronomes and lay tourists alike.

Set in a former saloon-turned-French laundromat (thus the name) that saw its last renovation by international architecture firm Snøhetta, and with California-based firm Envelope A+D, the 60-seat, design-led gem is as hard to book as ever before. With July celebrations set to commemorate 30 years of his iconic restaurant, the master chef shares some of his insider Napa Valley knowledge...

What are the biggest changes you've seen here since the opening of TFL in 1994?

One of the biggest changes since The French Laundry opened in 1994 has been in the landscape of winemaking. Back then, there were significantly fewer wineries compared to today – nearly 250 new ones have sprung up across the valley floor and hillsides since then. Alongside this growth, we've seen a flourishing community of local farmers and foragers. They provide our restaurants with the highest quality ingredients right at our doorstep, which has really elevated the dining experience.



The French Laundry. PHOTO: MICHAEL GRIMM

What was your original inspiration for the restaurant, the menu, the experience?

I've always maintained that Napa Valley is a perfect place for a restaurant. It's the only place in the country where people come specifically to drink excellent wines and eat fine food. But there's more to its appeal. I hoped guests would be transported by the location and feel enticed but not overwhelmed by the menu. Presented with the wine list, they could choose a bottle crafted a quarter of a mile up the road. The anticipation would build, and the visit would feel magical—even before the first bite of food.



Oysters & Pearls.PHOTO: DAVID ESCALANTE

Where do you dine/recommend when you're eating out?

In Yountville, I am excited about our new RO Restaurant and Lounge. It features a menu developed by Chef de Cuisine Jeffery Hayashi who has incorporated Asian influences into the menu, tossing pork belly with savory egg custard and topping huckleberry and hibiscus shave ice with creme fraiche. A few miles north in St. Helena is Press Restaurant—another favorite for its robust Napa Valley wine program and refined seasonal tasting menus.



RO Restaurant and Lounge.PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER STARK

How about for a basic burger?

A favorite is the TAK Room Burger, served at our Yountville restaurant Ad Hoc. It's available at the bar and made from equal parts sirloin, chuck, and brisket. We serve it on a toasted Viennois bun made up the street at Bouchon Bakery, with homemade Russian dressing and classic accouterments. It's so good!

Close friend and fourth-generation vintner, Joel Gott, has Gott's Roadside. Several outposts exist throughout the Bay Area, but the original one is in St. Helena. The extensive burger menu at Gott's Roadside offers a variety of options, ensuring there's something for everyone. And remember to try the soft serve for dessert, made by Marin County's Straus Family Creamery.



TAK Room Burger. PHOTO: DAVID ESCALANTE

Where are the best markets? A few of the best local purveyors?

Starting in Yountville, Finesse, The Store is our first retail storefront, and it's a place where every product is chosen with care. Here, you can find my signed cookbooks, a wide range of kitchen tools, cookware, and knives, all personally favored by me and our restaurants. We also have a fun golf section with a shirt I designed with the Peter Millar team, which benefits The First Tee and Ment'or BKB Foundation. This foundation mentors young chefs and supports Team USA in the Bocuse d'Or competition. Founder Laura Cunningham has even created a home fragrance candle collection with Joya, offering a sensory experience that represents our restaurants.

At the Culinary Institute of America's Copia, located in downtown Napa, you'll find its Marketplace, where you can buy a wide selection of cookbooks, many from alums, locally made pottery, children's culinary tools, and CIA apparel. When you're done shopping, visit the Chuck Williams Culinary Museum, located in the same building, and find your favorite whimsical-shaped tureen among its 4,000 artifacts.



Finesse the Store.PHOTO: DEBORAH JONES

What winemakers/tasting rooms aren't to be missed?

There are a few that stand out. Marc Nanes at Kenzo Estate

produces an incredible Sauvignon Blanc called 'Asatsuyu.' Then there's Frog's Leap in Rutherford, a place where you can be assured of an excellent tasting experience with their outstanding Sauvignon Blanc and other varietals. Larry Turley's Napa Valley Zinfandels are always a highlight. And, of course, Schramsberg for its history and fantastic tasting room; they also do our proprietary bottling of Blanc de Blanc sparkling wine for Modicum, a wine label founded by Founder Laura Cunningham, which we pair for The French Laundry's Oysters and Pearls dish.



Modicum Blanc de Blanc. PHOTO: DAVID ESCALANTE

Where do you go for culinary inspiration?

For me, it all began with my earliest influences. My mother, Betty, was my first role model. She gave me my first job and instilled in me a keen attention to detail. My brother Joseph taught me the foundational cooking skills, which set me on this path. My mentor, Roland Henin, showed me the personal dimension of cooking – how it’s about nourishing others and making people happy.

I’m also fortunate to have an incredibly dedicated team. Their collaboration constantly pushes us to evolve and innovate. They bring fresh perspectives that spark new ideas and the ambition to pursue them.

And The French Laundry culinary garden, across the street from The French Laundry inspires my teams and me daily. We work with the team to help determine the daily specials.



The French Laundry.PHOTO: MICHAEL GRIMM

What is a hobby or activity that you love – cycling, hiking – and what makes Napa so perfect for this pursuit?

I love to play golf, and Napa Valley’s year-round climate uniquely suits the sport. Dr. Tim Ryan of the Culinary Institute of America and I started the Thomas Keller Golf Classic to raise money for student scholarships. We play at the picturesque Silverado Resort and Spa, which offers a unique golfing experience. One of the many reasons the game is so special is that it fosters a sense of community, connecting people of various ages and backgrounds. I’ll often play with my team, and it’s a great way to catch up outside the restaurant.



Chef Thomas Keller.PHOTO: DAVID ESCALANTE

Where is next on your travel list?

I'm eagerly looking forward to returning to Lyon, France in January for the Bocuse d'Or, a biennial culinary competition named for Paul Bocuse, whom many consider the father of French cuisine. I'll be there supporting Team USA, who will be competing again for Gold!

Lyon, the birthplace of Chef Bocuse, holds a special significance in the culinary world and continues to be a gastronomic haven. France is a special place for me as I was a young stagiaire at some of Paris' top restaurants when I first started. It's familiar to me in many ways and always brings back sensory memories. It's also an opportunity to reconnect with fellow chefs and immerse myself in the culinary culture.

With thirty years behind the restaurant, what is ahead in terms of menus, design, and overall experience? Or will TFL stay blissfully the same?

The one constant for The French Laundry is change itself, and our story is one of continuous evolution. With three decades behind us and as we look ahead, we are committed to exploring new experiences and designs that resonate with our guests and continue to elevate their dining experience. This next phase heralds a new version of The French Laundry, the next generation, each building on the past, deeply rooted in our origins but forever evolving. Rest assured, our commitment to quality remains unwavering, shaped by the people who always have—and always will—make it what it is. Ours.

About Galerie

Launched in 2016 by Hudson Publishing LLC, *Galerie* magazine is a publication released five times a year that engages readers who have a passion for art and design. Its distinctive coverage informs and inspires—delivering the finest in art, interiors, and architecture, plus compelling creative talents and fascinating destinations. *Galerie* is available at Hudson News locations around the world, as well as select newsstands, private aviation terminals, and premier art and design events. *Galerie* inspires readers to LIVE ARTFULLY.