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The Cork Caucus

Congressman Mike Thompson has spent 10 years pushing wine in Washington

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Sitting on his barn deck overlooking the 18 acres of vines that went into the cold glass of Sauvignon Blanc in his hand, Mike Thompson turned to his vineyard manager and said, "I could sit up here every day."

But Thompson can't sit up here for even one day. At 6 the next morning, a Sunday, he was on a plane for Washington en route to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Like most small growers, Thompson, 57, and his wife, Jan, support their vineyard with full-time jobs. She is a nurse practitioner. He is a member of Congress, First District, California. The Afghanistan work was recon for an intelligence subcommittee he chairs. The tasting work was recon for the Congressional Wine Caucus he co-founded and co-chairs.

The name Congressional Wine Caucus has the ring of elitism - as if maybe it's he and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and a few other fortunate farmers from Oregon and Washington. But it is not as exclusive as that. Qualifications to join are that one must represent a place where people make wine or drink wine. By either criterion, representatives from all 50 states qualify. So do members from the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and American Samoa. So do U.S. senators. Hillary Clinton joined as soon as she got to Washington.

"I was in the Italian caucus when I was in the state Senate," Thompson says by way of describing the admission standard. "To be a member you had to either be Italian or have had a memorable experience with an Italian."

Meetings of the wine caucus are usually held in his Washington office. "We do the policy stuff, labeling, taxes, research funding, import-export," he explains. Winemaking constituents - Michael Mondavi, Jim Bundschu, Dan Duckhorn - who come through the capital are invited if they bring a bottle. If they bring more than one, Thompson might clear out his office, order a cheese platter and call an emergency session of the wine caucus. On occasion the stampede requires a hearing room.

There are about 250 members (second in size only to the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus), and each and every one is invited west for a congressional backgrounder, which starts at Thompson's single-story Victorian two blocks west of Main Street in St. Helena.

His vineyard is an hour and 10 minutes from home, 62 miles door to gate, just past Finley, Lake County. An hour's drive is like a trip to the corner market for Thompson. The First District is a narrow strip that runs from Napa north to the Oregon border, through seven counties. It takes 11 hours to drive it. The lone representative for North Dakota can cover his district/state in half the time.

"All the rural districts are big, because they are population-based," says Thompson, who has burned through four Ford Explorers and has 280,000 miles on his fifth. "Every district has to have the same number of people."

Coming out of the house he grew up in, holding an ice chest at both ends, Thompson points his right elbow to the end of Kearney Street, four houses away, where he attended St. Helena Elementary. Then he points his left elbow to the other end of Kearney, where he attended junior high.

To reach his property 2 miles south of Clear Lake, he goes the long way via Deer Park and Howell Mountain roads, to go by St. Helena Hospital, where he and his parents were born, and where Jan Thompson works. Riding it hard, up through Napa Valley, Pope Valley, Hidden Valley, Big Valley, he can tell you who owns, and who used to own, every vineyard and junkyard along the way. He points out the hubcap farm and the old auto garage with a bathtub full of rattlesnakes. Sprinkled in are hunting stories, fishing stories, stories about his great-great-grandfather's part in the Bear Flag Revolt, and St. Helena High School football and basketball stories. He would have been class of '69 if he hadn't dropped out to join the Army. He can show you where an 83-year-old constituent crawled out of a wildfire and commented, "I'm still here and I've still got an appetite. Could be worse" - a tagline Thompson is considering for his next re-election campaign.

The only stories he seems reluctant to tell are war stories. He was a platoon leader in the II Corps area of Vietnam and came home strapped to a litter on a transport plane bound for Letterman Hospital. After that trip he'd never complain about having to fly commercial 12 hours to Kuwait.

Discharged with a Purple Heart and back in St. Helena, Thompson found work fixing farm equipment for Beringer Vineyards. Beringer gave him a deal on 10 acres of hay field, which Thompson and a partner developed into a 10-acre vineyard. They sold it, and Thompson's split paid for his higher education at Chico State, which he calls "the Harvard of the state college system."

The Ford rises up into the land of Indian casino billboards advertising "free prime rib. Buy one, get one free." "I have more Native American tribes in my district than any member of Congress," he says. That makes two things he holds over the lone representative from North Dakota.

Around Kelseyville he points out a rolling hillside vineyard owned by Andy Beckstoffer, largest independent grower in Lake, Sonoma or Mendocino counties. It was Beckstoffer, hero of the 1990s

bestseller "Napa," who persuaded Thompson to buy here.

"Get into Lake County now. It's going to be big," Thompson says, repeating the sales pitch. "Buy a place and develop it. You need to be growing grapes." So the Thompsons bought an abandoned pear orchard and cleared it themselves.

He is proud to point out the boulders he laid in place as he pulls up to the gate with the wrought iron spelling out "Adobe Creek Ranch." The soil is volcanic, and Thompson upgraded it to organic. The certification must be renewed every year, which is a pain and an expense, but Thompson goes strictly by the rules. He helped write the legislation while in the state Senate. Since advancing to Washington, he has carried bills to expand wilderness in California and encourage landowners to protect endangered species habitats. This advocacy persuaded colleagues to short list Thompson for Secretary of the Interior in the Obama administration.

"I think we have responsibility to be sustainable," he says, "and I think any way you can enhance that is beneficial."

Another enhancement he's for is fancifying his appellation, currently Lake County, which lacks cachet. Any limo seen in these parts is trying to find its way to Konocti Harbor for a concert. Thompson and other growers have applied to have the bench between Mount Konocti and the Mayacamas range declared Big Valley. Its altitude, 1,400 feet, and temperature swings are advantageous for green grapes, compared with that other valley down below.

"Some people feel we can grow better-quality Sauvignon here than in Napa," says Thompson's vineyard manager David Weiss, "but Napa is a destination." The only time Finley is a destination is for the annual Pig Out at the Pump House, at Adobe Creek Ranch. An item at the Lake County Wine Alliance auction, it brought \$5,000 this year, he says.

Thompson's grapes, picked by a machine that straddles the row, bring \$900 to \$1,500 a ton, half of what Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc grapes bring, Weiss says. The average yield is 140 tons, which Thompson sells to Fetzer Vineyards, in Mendocino County. Its blend for the 2006 Sauvignon Blanc is 52 percent Lake County and 48 percent Mendocino. The label reads Bonterra, which so happens to be the \$13 bottle that Thompson unscrews on the deck off the second floor of his newly constructed barn.

For 10 years, weekend farming at Adobe Creek has meant getting a room in Kelseyville or wherever. But once power is brought to the barn, the loft can be built out as overnight quarters. This should improve the yield on his standing invitation to wine caucus members.

So far just one has made it up to Big Valley - Bart Gordon, representing the wine consumers of Murfreesboro, Tenn.

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