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Lasseter winery coming into its own

BY VIRGINIE BOONE THE PRESS DEMOCRAT September 23, 2011, 7:06PM



Nancy Lasseter was a single mom with a 5-year-old son and was putting herself through school when she met John Lasseter at a computer graphics trade show in San Francisco in 1985.

John, today a two-time Academy Award-winning director and chief creative officer for Walt Disney Animation and Pixar Animation Studios, was at Lucasfilm working on “Young Sherlock Holmes” at the time, while Nancy needed to get back to Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh to finish her degree in design.

By 1986, she was in California full-time, doing interface design with the advanced futures group at Apple Computer, experimenting with some of the first 3-D animation on the Macintosh computer.

Lasseter Family Winery

The Lasseters share a love of storytelling through animation, and they would soon nurture a mutual interest in wine as well. Nancy joined a tasting group in Cupertino as a way to meet people and she and her now-husband John would often escape up to Wine Country for romantic getaways, including a honeymoon trip through the Alexander Valley, Mendocino and the Napa Valley.

It wasn't until the couple had three more sons and decided to move to Sonoma in 1993 that the wine bug really bit hard — Nancy in particular.

“My cleaning lady, Susan Blue, was there on a Friday and I said, & ‘what are you doing this weekend?’” Nancy recalled. “And she said, & ‘we’re going picking and crushing,’ and I went, & ‘ah, I’ve been wanting to do that. Can I come?’”

“We didn’t have the concept of people doing this amateurishly, as a hobby,” added John. “It was such a cool concept. Friends get together and form this co-op, make wine together and all share it.”

Nancy remembers the joyful, back-breaking work as if it were yesterday — the shoveling of zinfandel bunches into the back of a truck, the hand pressing, the bees.

“I’ll never forget her coming home completely splattered with red wine and the look on her face,” John said. “She was so excited. Wow, okay, I thought, now I want to do this.”

By 1997, they bottled up enough zinfandel and a Bordeaux blend to print out Lasseter Family Winery labels to give out as Christmas gifts and that was that — a new family business was born.

In 2000, they bought 50 bare acres on Dunbar Road in Glen Ellen, planted syrah, grenache and mourvedre and started making wine at friends Tom and Marcy Smothers’ winery just up the hill.



They bought an adjoining 35-acre property in 2002 with merlot and cabernet sauvignon grapes and a winery on it, previously used by Carmenet Winery. There, they quickly set about adding malbec and cabernet franc grapes as well.

“We started thinking about what we want our wine to be,” John said. “We knew this was going to be a long-term development plan. We were looking for a new winemaker and we found Julia Iantosca.”

Iantosca, who came on board at Lasseter in 2005, has been making wine for three decades. She spent time as the winemaker at Stevenot Vineyards in Murphys, William Wheeler Winery and Lambert Bridge Winery, both in Healdsburg, and worked closely with consulting winemaker Merry Edwards, who helped inspire Iantosca’s love of blended wines.

“When John and Nancy explained that their goal was to make French-style blends, that really was my favorite thing at Wheeler and Lambert Bridge,”

Iantosca said. “And I’ve always liked the fruit from Sonoma Valley. I’ve always felt it was a really good place to be growing grapes.”



*Lasseter Family Winery winemaker
Julia Iantosca*

John sees a lot in common between winemaking and computer animation, seeing both disciplines as the perfect blend and collaboration between art and technology, art and science.

Iantosca loves the fact that the Lasseters understand the importance of patience.

“With John’s background in filmmaking, the kernel of an idea can take four years to come to the screen, the whole business is patience,” she said. “I usually have to explain to people the business of patience that this is. You have to have that long-term view because it takes so long to develop.”

With Iantosca on board, the Lasseters focused on making four estate-grown wines, giving them all proprietary French names and new French retro-style poster labels designed by Glen Ellen artist Dennis Zieminski.

The first is Enjou?(\$24), a dry ros?blend of syrah, mourvedre and grenache inspired by the Lasseters’ travels in the south of France. The 2010 vintage, out now, is stunning, all restrained strawberry and ruby grapefruit.



Then there’s Chemin de Fer (\$40), a blend of grenache, syrah and mourvedre with tremendous berry flavor.

“I’m a storyteller and Nancy’s a great storyteller, too, and we decided that for each one of our wines, there’s a reason we make it based on things we love, experiences we’ve had and so we crafted stories around each one,” John said.

Chemin de Fer has a particularly special connection to John’s heart, because within his syrah vineyard is an actual full-size narrow-gauge Porter steam locomotive that once belonged to John’s mentor, Disney animator Ollie Johnston, who started his career with “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.”

Then there are the two Bordeaux blends, Paysage, a lush, St. Emilion-inspired merlot, cabernet sauvignon, malbec and cabernet franc bottling, and the bold Amoureux (\$40), which is 66 percent malbec with smaller amounts of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc, a nod to the couple’s happy discovery of Sonoma-grown malbec on their honeymoon.

Meanwhile, the Lasseters recently bought an adjoining 10-acre parcel that had been separated from their historic property in the early 1900s. It has a field blend of mostly zinfandel planted in 1919 that they’ll soon be releasing as its own wine.

Ultimately, the Lasseters are committed to preserving both the historical legacy of their land — once the site of a Wells Fargo stagecoach stop and Glen Ellen’s first post office — and creating something for the future of their five sons, the youngest of whom is 14, and their children beyond.

Until his death this year, John’s father also lived on the property and worked every harvest, making Lasseter Family Winery a three-generation affair. But mostly both Nancy and John wanted to make sure their wines were ready before they started telling their story.

“It’s like his movies. We wanted everything worked out so we had a story to tell, a complete story,” she said.

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