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Montage

LIFE, WELL LIVED

SPRING 2015

Family FIRST

SPENDING TIME
WITH THOSE THAT
MATTER MOST

ON THE ROAD
REGAINING TIME
ON THE CAMINO
DE SANTIAGO

GOING BEYOND
MONTAGE
REWARDS YOUNG
HUMANITARIANS

CURATORIAL
SENSE
MUSEUM
MASTERS
TALK ART





John and Nancy Lasseter (back row, center) with their five sons and dogs

Passion Play

John and Nancy Lasseter put their creativity and love of grapes to work at the Lasseter Family Winery.

BY MATT VILLANO

Few wines are made with the creativity of a Disney chief officer and the ingenuity of a former Apple Computer engineer. The partnership of imagination and inventiveness that John and Nancy Lasseter share, however, has resulted in something worth sipping slowly.

The couple has channeled their shared passions into the Lasseter Family Winery, a small, artisan winery in the heart of the Sonoma Valley. The Glen Ellen, Calif.-based business specializes in estate-grown, Bordeaux-style blends—fruit-forward wines meant to complement, not overpower, food.

Though production is small—2014 yielded only 3,200 cases—the winery’s reputation continues to grow. Some might even argue that the

Lasseters make some of the most popular wines west of the Mayacamas Mountains that separate Sonoma and Napa counties.

Of course, for Nancy, all that matters is that she and her husband are enjoying themselves.

“We see this as a project from which we’re always learning, an effort in which we’re always experimenting,” she says. “It’s work, but it’s work we love. We’re using the wines of the world as an inspiration, but our main goal is to create something unique, something of this place.”

Planting the Seeds

Neither John nor Nancy ever would have imagined that they would become winery owners. Their interest in wine stemmed from simply drinking it.

Nancy Lasseter worked for years as a computer graphics engineer at Apple Computer, developing early iterations of QuickTime, a popular multimedia program. As chief creative officer for Pixar Animation Studios, Walt Disney Animation Studios, and Disneytoon Studios, John Lasseter has amassed a staggering number of awards and nominations for directing and producing films such as “Tin Toy,” “Toy Story” and “Cars.”

Their professions led them to meet at a computer graphics conference in 1985, but they bonded over glasses of wine. On weekends, the couple escaped to different areas of wine country. After their wedding in 1988, they honeymooned in Sonoma County, not far from where their property sits today.

Just five years later, the two chose the region as

their permanent home to raise their family, which now includes five sons. From that point, it was only a matter of time until the Lasseters caught the winemaking bug, and they began accumulating land on which to grow grapes of their own. As the vineyard grew, Nancy took on more of a leadership role, especially after Disney bought Pixar Animation Studios in 2006, which added to her husband's professional responsibilities.

"We make all of the biggest decisions for the winery together, but John has a day job, and neither one of us can justify taking him out of that."

Once things began running smoothly at the winery, the only thing left to develop was a logo. According to Stephen Pirak, the winery's consumer direct manager, that came about quickly after the family spent a few weeks in Ireland tracking some of Nancy's ancestors. The couple was taken by the prevalence of family crests, so on the flight home, John grabbed an extra cocktail napkin and started sketching one of his own.

By the time the plane started its descent, the family crest—now on every bottle—was born. The image shows a smiling bee approaching a

beautiful rose, symbolizing the illustrator and his wife, respectively. Beneath, a vine grows with five grapes, one for each of their sons.

"It's so neat for us to know the story behind that logo," Pirak says. "There are so many stories to tell. Everything here speaks."

Commitment to Terroir

Even the wines themselves tell the story of the Lasseters' land and their approach to winemaking.

Most wine experts talk a lot about terroir—the concept of how a region's climate, soil and terrain affect the taste of wine. At the Lasseter Family Winery, this notion is key to the couple, who has stitched together varied plots of land according to the kinds of grapes they want to grow. Their philosophy is simple: Grow great grapes, and don't get in the way of using them to make great wine.

Everyday application of this philosophy falls on winemaker Julia Iantosca, who has worked for the Lasseters from the very beginning. Iantosca's three decades of experience and interest in crafting wines in an Old World style aligns perfectly with the couple's love of France and



The winery hosts tours and tastings by appointment.

"We see this as a project from which we're always learning, an effort in which we're always experimenting."

— NANCY LASSETER



The Lasseter Family Winery sits on nearly 100 acres of vineyards in the heart of Sonoma County, Calif.



Julia Iantosca, the Lasseters' winemaker, has three decades of experience and an affinity for Old World wines.

French wine. This all translates into the six wines that the winery produces, including a zinfandel from grapes grown on century-old vines and a blend inspired by a wine the couple discovered on their honeymoon.

Every year, Iantosca also makes an experimental wine dubbed Bricolage, a blend that changes depending on the season's best fruit. The 2013 iteration was 100-percent grenache from six different clones grown on-site; she hasn't decided on the blend for 2014's grapes yet.

The mixtures in each of the Lasseter blends is the result of the couple's respect for what Iantosca calls the art of winemaking, adding that the Lasseters contribute their ideas and opinions to the blending process during every vintage. "They're not doing this to check a box," Iantosca says. "They're doing it because they're passionate about good wine. So long as we're making good wine, they're behind it."

Of course, one large part of creating good

DIRECTING THE SHOW

When John Lasseter isn't making Bordeaux-style wines, he's producing and directing some of the most beloved animated movies of our time. Here are just some of the milestone creations that Lasseter has been a part of during his prolific career.



"Toy Story" (1995)

1984: Lasseter animated on "The Adventures of André and Wally B.," the iconic film from the Graphics Group, a part of Lucasfilm that later became Pixar.

1995: Directed and co-written by Lasseter, "Toy Story" was the very first feature-length, computer-animated film and is still widely considered one of the best animated movies ever made. The first theatrical release from Pixar was nominated for three Academy Awards and also inducted into the National Film Registry in 2005 for changing the face of animation.

1998: Also directed and co-written by Lasseter, "A Bug's Life" received praise for its groundbreaking animation and well-developed plot. The film won numerous awards, including the Broadcast Film Critics Association Award for Best Animated Film and Best Family Film.

1999: The plot of "Toy Story 2" was inspired by Lasseter's own thoughts about how a toy might feel if it wasn't played with. Despite production hiccups and a major revision, the Lasseter-directed sequel was just as successful as the first.



"A Bug's Life" (1998)

2006: Pixar's final independently-produced film before being purchased by Disney, "Cars" was inspired by a road trip Lasseter took with his wife and sons. He directed the movie, which earned a Golden Globe Award for Best Animated Feature Film.

2010: While Lasseter was busy directing "Cars 2," Disney released the Pixar-produced "Toy Story 3." The third film in the successful franchise still bore Lasseter's handprint, as he, along with Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, developed the story.

"Toy Story 3" received widespread acclaim and was the highest grossing film worldwide that year.

Expected in 2017: The rumors are true—"Toy Story 4" is currently under development with Lasseter again at the helm as director and co-writer. While fans of the movies have voiced apprehension, Lasseter issued a statement reassuring audiences. "We love these characters so much; they are like family to us," he said. "We don't want to do anything with them unless it lives up to or surpasses what's gone before."

THE LASSETER LINEUP

Nancy and John Lasseter's winery has become known for its inventive red blends. Each bottle is decorated with an illustration by Dennis Zieminski, an artist based out of Glen Ellen, Calif. For a taste of local art and flavor try any of these Lasseter sips.

ENJOUÉ is a dry rose blend of red grapes, including syrah, mourvedre and grenache, made in a white wine style. It has fruity notes of strawberry, red grapefruit and mango, and the name is a French word that captures joy, playfulness and lighthearted cheer.

CHEMIN DE FER means "railroad" and alludes to John Lasseter's love of trains—he even has one on the private area of the ranch. The wine, with notes of raspberry and spice, represents the path that led the couple to winemaking, especially a trip they took through Southern France by steam train.

L'AME DU SAGE translates to "soul of the wise man" and represents the history of the Lasseters' land: It's made from vines that are pruned by hand and have been producing fruit for nearly a century. The wine offers a deep flavor, rich with berries, black pepper and spice.

PAYSAGE is the Lasseter's inaugural wine and is meant to evoke tranquil thoughts of a landscape painting. The Bordeaux-style wine has merlot as the lead varietal along with malbec and cabernet sauvignon. It's aged for 18 months in European oak for a savory, plum flavor.

AMOUREUX is a blend featuring merlot, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and malbec, a variety that the couple discovered on their honeymoon in Sonoma County. They since planted the grapes in their own vineyard to offer this wine with notes of blueberry, clove, vanilla and nutmeg.

BRICOLAGE means "an assemblage of found things" in French. It is a special bottle created by the Lasseter couple and their winemaker, Julia Iantosca, with the best fruit of the season; the 2013 iteration uses grenache grapes from six different clones grown on the Lasseters' land.



wine is the farming behind the grapes. Though the vineyard isn't certified organic, it is farmed organically under the watch of vineyard manager Phil Coturri, who Iantosca calls "the grape whisperer."

Coturri, considered by many to be the grandfather of organic farming in California wine country, does not use pesticides or any synthetic substances to help care for the vines. Instead, he prefers to solve problems as naturally as possible. For example, rather than irrigating the vines daily, he dry farms them, which encourages deeper root growth. Rather than managing pests with spray, he relies on birds to play exterminators, and has built boxes for owls and bluebirds to live in the vineyard. He also replaces fertilizer with cover crops such as beans, peas, oats and mustard, and tills nitrogen-rich plant matter into the soil to keep it rich.

"Winemakers are like chefs; they want the best raw materials possible to get the best flavors they can," notes Coturri, whose company, Enterprise Vineyards, manages more than 600 acres near Sonoma. "To me, you lay a good foundation in the vineyard, you cultivate the vines the right way, and everything else falls into place."

The Full Experience

Guests learn all about Lasseter Family Winery's organic approach when they visit for a 90-minute tasting and tour—an intimate experience designed for eight or fewer visitors at a time.

Pirak greets visitors in the winery vestibule with rose, then shares a bit about the history of the property and a crash course in terroir. From there, he leads guests down the back stairs and into the production facility and barrel room for a look at how wines are made and stored.

Next, everyone heads to the grand sitting room for their tasting. Each guest is presented with four wine glasses and a plate of local cheeses, Marcona almonds and dried cherries. Pirak guides visitors through each of the blended wines, encouraging them to sample each of the cheeses along the way.

Of the four, L'Ame du Sage, the old vine zinfandel, stands out most from the red blends with notes of berries, black pepper and spice. Another highlight of the tasting experience is the dark chocolate truffle made with a tiny bit of Amoureux, the winery's blend of malbec and cabernet sauvignon.

The reasons to make a visit to the Lasseter Family Winery don't stop with the tasting and tour; the future is bright for the family business.

Iantosca has recently created a white wine from equal parts sauvignon blanc and semillon that is expected to be released later this year. The Bordeaux-style wine, called Voila, replaces the typically crisp flavor with notes of oak and "a little meat on the bones." The winemaker also says she's looking forward to upcoming iterations of the Bricolage, which should comprise more cabernet franc than the wine ever has.

On the back end, a large-scale project is also underway: expansion.

The Lasseters expect to double production to as many as 6,000 cases over the next six years. This will mean bigger production facilities and a larger barrel room. The additions could require some investments and even purchasing grapes from other properties for the first time in the winery's history, a leap the Lasseters would make carefully.

The couple also hopes to expand into other niches such as a cottage foods company that will sell only items grown from the Lasseter Family Winery garden. "Wine is our passion, but grapes aren't the only thing we can grow here and grow well," Nancy says. "The more we farm, the more we make from this land—the more stories we can tell." **M**