

Lasseter winery a Glen Ellen delight

Carey Sweet

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Nancy & John Lasseter walking in their Justi Creek Vineyards. Photo: Brown Cannon

Three facts you might not have known about wine: (A) Some of the grapevine roots in Sonoma reach 60 feet into the ground; (B) Enough carbon dioxide is released by the fermenting grapes with open-top tanks that a winemaker could pass out; and (C) Having Buzz Lightyear flying around with a glass of Malbec in his Space Ranger hand is a bad idea.

Valuable lessons learned at the new Lasseter Family Winery in Glen Ellen. That's Lasseter as in John Lasseter, chief creative officer at Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios, who last spring opened a tasting room at the winery he'd quietly been building southwest of Dunbar Road and Highway 12.

Though there is no hint of movie-house merchandising at the elegant property (see Buzz rationale above), the experience brings a bit of theater to this hidden-away gem, thanks to the remarkable storytelling skills of my tasting host.

THE VIBE: Behind imposing gates sits a gracious gray contemporary farmhouse style building, ringed by gardens and a small creek. Inside, it feels more like a boardroom, with by-appointment-only tastings done at a polished dark wood conference table framed by turquoise executive chairs, and backlit shelves of wine plus a tasteful display of merchandise - logo glasses and jackets.

THE EXPERIENCE: This is an "E" ticket, for those who remember the old Disneyland admission system - the E coupons for the newest and most thrilling rides. The \$25 fee includes a behind-the-scenes tour into the tank rooms (during harvest, my host promised, visitors can do some hands-on tank work if they like), the crush pad, and even into the winemaker's laboratory.

Plan on a good hour here, to savor the wines against the host's insider-rich tales of the surrounding Justi Creek area, how many of the decorative plants double as insectaries, and fun facts like though the "owl box" at the entry vineyards is actually a security camera, the rest of the estate does practice natural predator control. Tastings also include a cheese plate, with dried fruits, nuts, dainty crackers and chocolate made in Glen Ellen with Lasseter's own Malbec.

THE TEAM: John and Nancy Lasseter made Sonoma their full-time home in 1993, and in 2002 they purchased what had been the Grand Cru Winery. In 2009, they finished remodeling for their own winery, then opened the tasting room in 2011. Julia Iantosca is the winemaker; she's spent three decades in Sonoma County, including working with consulting winemaker Merry Edwards at Lambert Bridge Winery in Healdsburg.

THE WINES: Just five wines are produced from the 27 acres of certified organic vines on the 95-acre estate, yet they contain a rich array of Bordeaux- and Rhone-style grapes. The crisp, dry 2011 Enjoué Rosé (\$19) and the 2010 Chemin de Fer (\$40) blend different percentages of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre, while the 2009 Paysage (\$40) and the 2009 Amoureux (\$40) are different percentages of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Cabernet Franc. Another wine, L'Ame du Sage, will be released in April as a field blend from a plot of circa-1919 old Vine Zinfandel that was discovered on the property interspersed with uncommon-to-Sonoma European grapes such as Lenoir, Peloursin and Grand Noir de la Calmette.

THE EXTRAS: The trivia is great fun, including that the estate is home not only to the Lasseter family, but to the original Marie E. 1901 steam engine train that used to circle Disneyland and now chugs its way through the Syrah vineyard.

IF YOU GO: Open by appointment only. Lasseter Family Winery, 1 Vintage Lane, Glen Ellen. (707) 933-2800. lasseterfamilywinery.com.

NEARBY: Wellington Vineyards, 11600 Dunbar Rd., Glen Ellen, (707) 939-0708, wellingtonvineyards.com. Loxton Cellars, 11466 Dunbar Rd., Glen Ellen, (707) 935-7221, loxtonwines.com. Mayo Family Winery, 13101 Arnold Dr., Glen Ellen, (707) 938-9401, mayofamilywinery.com.

RATING: THREE STARS



Lasseter Family Winery contemporary farmhouse style building, ringed by gardens and a small creek. Photo: George Rose