

STYLE NEWS

JOHN LASSETER OPENS UP ABOUT SECRET WINERY FOR FIRST TIME

Pixar's chief creative officer and his wife, Nancy, tell THR about their decision to enter the winemaking business 11 years ago, how they are bringing Pixar-type values to their Sonoma vineyard -- and why they kept it on the down low for so long.

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Everyone knows that **John Lasseter**, who's set to receive a star Nov. 1 on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, built the animation giant Pixar. That he and his wife, **Nancy**, created the Lasseter Family Winery in the Sonoma Valley has been something of a secret -- until now. Just a few years

ago, the couple's wines were given away at charity events and sold in small amounts via a mailing list. In July, the couple went pro, hiring a publicist, getting representation from distributors covering eight states and talking about their side business for the first time. But after a good 11 years of operation, the question is: Why lift the embargo now? "It's like with John's films; he won't speak a word until he finds all the parts of his story," explains Nancy. "John jokes that the winery is my movie. Now we can talk. Our wines are ready -- we know the story."

Producer-director winemaking is not a new phenomenon, especially among Lasseter's friends. **Francis Ford Coppola** is the most visible; he produces about a million cases a year, and his high-end estate winery, Inglenook, gets upward of 45,000 visitors annually. **George Lucas** is the most veiled, with his Skywalker pinot shrouded in mystique. He seeks no publicity, allows no visitors and makes only 600 cases a year. The Lasseters straddle the line. They've recently ramped up production to a boutique-scale 6,500 cases a year and have quietly built a following, getting served at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner and on such Los Angeles lists as **Michael Mina's** XIV, Drago Centro and the box seats at the Hollywood Bowl. But their vineyards only can be visited by those in the wine trade with appointments.

On their property in Glen Ellen, with its 27 acres of vines, Nancy's imaginative design flair (she studied graphic design at Carnegie Mellon) is demonstrated in her wild idea to transform a stainless-steel fermentation tank into a luxe outhouse and in the chandelier in the middle of the industrial vat room. John, 54, was 100 percent responsible for the vintage steam train, the Marie-E, puffing through the syrah vineyard -- it once belonged to his mentor, **Ollie Johnston**, one of Disney's original animators known as the Nine Old Men. He also keeps on the site the 1964 Ford Falcon that inspired Cars. "I'm a big kid," says John, who drives his Mercedes-Benz E55 about an hour each way to work in Emeryville every day. "I learned I never had to grow up. I have one of the biggest toy collections -- Pixar -- and Nancy is very tolerant of my toys at home."

Selling wine is one challenge for the couple, privacy is another. "We need to stop people from throwing scripts over the fence," says Nancy, 51. "My staff knows that anything that comes in addressed to John gets returned."

One of the changes the Lasseters are eager to brag about is their new labels. "Each one tells a story about the wine," says Nancy. "On the syrah is the Marie-E." She points out the floral label for a blend based on their favorite grape, malbec. "I'm the wild Irish rose," Nancy says. "And the bee -- well, that's John's first animation, Wally B."

For her, it conjures up the moment they met in the early 1980s at a Siggraph computer graphics conference while John was working for Lucasfilm. She joined Apple a few years later, and they became close to Steve Jobs ("We were like brothers," John says.)

In 1992, when the family (which would grow to include five boys) came to live in Sonoma, Nancy's housekeeper took her home to her own hill full of zinfandel vines. Nancy came back a sticky mess and gushed to her husband: "John, you have to come with me. It's fabulous!" They turned amateur vintners, using their good friends **Marcy** and **Tom Smothers'** nearby winery. Ten years later, Nancy suggested

they start to get their hobby to break even, and they bought the old Grand Cru vineyard, the site of a notorious 1989 mass murder. Asked whether they ever doubted their decision, Nancy says, "Sure, we were concerned, but I had an energy healer come in and check the place out."

They made sure in other ways as well. Viewing themselves as stewards, the Lasseters hired famed organic viticulturalist **Phil Coturri** to convert the land. "After Grand Cru, the land had gone to the Chalone Group," says Coturri of the vast multi-vineyard operation. "I love that a family with values like the Lasseters bought back a corporate winery. They are interested in quality and tradition, not just the bottom line."

They make the wine with veteran Sonoma-based oenologist **Julia lantosca**, which further reflects the Lasseters' sensibility -- she's known for making classics, not cult-chasers. "The Lasseters want to make blends," says lantosca. "This is brave because the conventional wisdom is to make single varietals." It is also the old way in California -- where balance used to matter more than flash -- and that resonates with the couple.

To the extent he can, John is very involved in blending choices, design and working the harvest. "What I mostly love about this life is the balance it brings," he says. "I love being this close to agriculture -- it's very grounding. The people are too. I love the Sonoma wine community. It's like Pixar -- nothing competitive, only supportive. They're always rooting for you."