

# Paving the Way for California Pinot Noir

## Texas transplants Adam and Dianna Lee track down the best West Coast vineyards to make stellar wines

By Tim Fish

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Adam and Dianna Lee, who make top-flight Pinot Noir and Syrah in California's Sonoma County, give new meaning to the term "family winery." Husband-and-wife winemakers are not unheard of in California, but few—and even fewer with three kids in tow—have tied it up in a more successful package than the hardworking duo behind the Siduri and Novy labels.

In a relatively short order, the Lees' Siduri label has become a beacon for California Pinot Noir. Since debuting with the 1994 vintage, Siduri has earned outstanding ratings (90 to 94 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale) on more than 40 percent of its wines. With a modest, 8,000-case annual production, the winery can make upwards of 25 separate Pinot Noirs in a given vintage, many in lots as small as 300 cases.

Siduri was among the first wineries to buy fruit from what are now considered to be California's top Pinot vineyards, including Garys', Cargasacchi, Rosella's, Hirsch, Clos Pepe and Pisoni—grape sources that many producers today would kill for. Along the way, the Lees have helped wine regions such as Santa Rita Hills, Sonoma Coast and Santa Lucia Highlands establish reputations as prime vineyard areas.

Winemaker Brian Loring of Loring Wine Co. in the California Central Coast says, "We call Adam 'Uncle Sid,' [short for] Uncle Siduri. There is a family of producers that they have helped spawn over the years. Adam has been such a mentor for so many of us."

For two kids from Texas with no formal training in winemaking, the Lees have come a long way. "I don't think they sleep," jokes friend and fellow winemaker Mike Officer of Carlisle Winery.

Driving to Siduri, you'll have better luck finding blue-light specials than vineyards. With neighbors like K-Mart and discount furniture stores, the winery is located in a warehouse on a dead-end street in northwest Santa Rosa, the largest city in Sonoma County. But during one of the Lees' semiannual open houses on a Saturday afternoon in early winter, a siege of cars surrounds the warehouse and hundreds of people roam around inside, wineglasses in hand.

Adam can be found scaling a stack of case boxes and squeezing through a canyon of oak to draw a sample of wine from a barrel, wearing shiny parachute pants and a Mondale-Ferraro T-shirt. A DJ in the warehouse plays the '80s hit "Whip It," while three guests wearing black clothes and red terraced hats à la Devo dance around the room, cracking whips in the air.

To add to the eccentric atmosphere, it's apparent that the Lees' kids rule the roost. Among the Euromachine press and François Frères oak barrels are tricycles and child-size Thomas the Tank Engine furniture. A car seat is standard equipment in the cab of the flatbed truck used at harvest.

This is not the California winery that dad used to know. The Lees are a part of a new era of winemakers that began arriving in the early 1990s. To some extent, they and their peers were rebelling against the cookie-cutter mentality of the larger California wineries. Owning vineyards or a chic, state-of-the-art winery was not an option for this new generation. Many were guided by passion, not a degree in viticulture, and wines were handcrafted in small lots.

"They have poured so much heart and soul and spirit into their brands," says Bob Cabral, winemaker of Sonoma's original cult Pinot producer, Williams Selyem. "They go from Oregon to Santa Barbara [overseeing vineyards], and it makes me tired just thinking about all the wines they make."

The Lees started the Novy label in 1998, when they found an exceptional source for Syrah but wanted to keep Siduri strictly a Pinot label. They share ownership of Novy with eight members of Dianna's family, the Novys. Today, they make about 5,000 cases under the Novy label, most of it Syrah, but there's also Zinfandel, Grenache, Chardonnay, Viognier and Nebbiolo.

From their first release, the Siduri Pinots have been notable for their richness, structure and vibrant ripe fruit, a style that has helped fuel the current Pinot craze. Much of the winemaking is done in the vineyard, says Adam, who typically contracts to buy grapes by the acre, not the ton. The Lees are in charge of specific rows in some vineyards, which allows them to better control factors such as crop size, sun and water exposure, and when the grapes are picked.

In 2006, the Lees produced 21 vineyard-designated Pinots from six distinct regions, plus seven appellation-blends. Novy typically has 10 vineyard-designated Syrahs and three vineyard-designated Zinfandels. "It started out with one vineyard and then three, and then it kind of snuck up on us," Dianna says. Part of this approach is practical; it provides a cushion, as not all winegrowing regions may thrive in a given year.

Their job requires a great deal of time on the road, but Adam, 43, and Dianna, 37, have become skilled jugglers. The couple shared the workload equally in the early years, but Adam took on more of the day-to-day chores as the family grew, particularly after son Truett was born in 2006 (siblings Christian and Amber are 8 and 4, respectively).

Adam and Dianna make several trips a day between the winery and their home, in the bedroom community of Windsor. During harvest, Dianna takes the lead on the vineyards in Sonoma County, while Adam oversees the vines in Monterey and Santa Barbara counties and in Oregon's Willamette Valley (the source of several of the winery's midpriced bottlings). His drive from the warehouse winery in Santa Rosa to Cargasacchi Vineyard in Santa Rita Hills alone stretches about 350 miles and takes about six hours, when the traffic is good. "Our hope is the wines really reflect the place," Dianna says. "Adam and I are a bit nerdy about all of it. I guess we just got a little carried away."

The two met while working at Neiman Marcus in Dallas, he as a wine buyer, she as a food buyer. When Adam moved to Sonoma County in 1993, his goal was to write about wine, not make it, but he soon decided it was his hands that should be purple, not his prose. He took on various jobs at Sterling, Lambert Bridge and Benziger. Dianna followed him to California in 1994. The two decided to pool their money—all \$24,000 of it—and launch Siduri, named for the Babylonian goddess of wine.

The early vintages were made at Lambert Bridge and other wineries before the Lees got their own facility, in 1998. The location seemed dubious at first, but the area soon became a haven for young winemakers, as producers such as Pax, DuMol, Donum, Roessler and Pisoni moved into surrounding warehouses.

If the Lees faced a learning curve, it seldom showed in their wines. The first release, Anderson Valley Pinot Noir Rose Vineyard 1994, scored 89 points, and subsequent bottlings rarely rated fewer than 85 points. While the single-vineyard Pinots range in price from \$39 to \$53, the appellation wines are a relative steal for the quality. The Willamette Valley and Sonoma County Pinots, for example, sell for \$19. "It's important to us to have Pinot Noirs in different price ranges," Adam says. "If we're really going to grow the California wine business, we need to have some of those value wines available to people. It helps drive our business. A lot of new customers find us through those wines."

Not that value Pinot is an easy prospect in California. "If our goal was making a lower-end Pinot, we would have a hard time," Adam says. "Any barrels that don't make the cut for a single-vineyard wine are blended together for an appellation wine. Pinot is so finicky that you need to concentrate on hitting a home run just to get a single."

It's not always easy for a couple to work together, but the Lees have managed. "Adam and I don't second guess each other," Dianna says. "We really trust each other and respect each other." They work on all the blends together with assistant winemaker Ryan Zepaltas. There are a couple hundred distinctive lots to compare, each from different vineyards or blocks, grown with different clones and aged in different styles of oak.

The Siduri Pinots continue to evolve. The house style was originally conceived as an alternative to the thin California Pinots of the 1980s and early '90s, but Adam recently realized that he was following a cookie-cutter mentality of his own in his pursuit of rich, full-bodied Pinots. "Wineries have pushed the envelope a bit and we were a part of that," he concedes. "Sometimes you don't know until you push the edge a little bit [how far you can go], and you may go a little too far." Dianna describes the Lees' early Pinots as "angular."

The Lees have since backed down on the ripeness levels on a number of vineyards. They have also changed their approach on barrel aging, keeping some vineyard-designated Pinots longer in barrel with the goal of adding complexity and improving balance. "Intensity was the mantra for a while, and I think intensity is fine as long as there's enough complexity there, but intensity when sacrificing complexity may not always be worthwhile," Adam says. "We're trying to build more layers of flavor into our Pinot. We have great fruit in California—some Burgundians would kill for that fruit. But if there's one thing California doesn't do as well as Burgundy, it's creating those different layers of flavors, different complexities."

Looking toward the future, the Lees show no signs of slowing down; Pinot Noir will be a lifelong endeavor, although Adam worries that the varietal will follow in the footsteps of Merlot and ultimately suffer from its rapidly achieved success. "I think popularity can be a bad thing," he muses. "You wonder if people are buying it just because it's trendy right now or whether they really love it. There are also concerns that people are planting Pinot in areas that might not be the best, the way it happened with Merlot."

The Lees are adamant that they won't be adding any more Pinot Noir vineyards to their portfolio, but then again they have a hard time saying no to the possibilities of the next new vineyard. "Some of it has been chasing an elusiveness—what can we find that is truly unique and special?" Adam says. "I think there is a chasing of the Holy Grail with Pinot Noir, looking for that ethereal experience."