

Lee Hudson

Owner

Hudson Vineyards

5398 Carneros Highway, Napa

550 cases

Lee Hudson, recently honored by Napa Valley Grapegrowers as Grower of the Year for 2008, found the property for growing Pinot Noir he was looking for when he came to Carneros in May of 1980. He'd been looking for over a year, traveling from Santa Barbara to Mendocino, after spending time in Oregon's Willamette Valley and

doing graduate work at UC Davis. The more than 100 acres of unimproved pasture Lee found in Carneros had no fence, water or buildings although it had once been part of historic “Talcoa,” a vineyard estate owned by James W. Simonton, a San Francisco newspaper magnate and head of Associated Press. Simonton had been the first to conduct experiments for Phylloxera-resistant rootstock and publish his results. George Husmann, a viticulturalist from Missouri, directed the trials. Lee says some FPS (UC Davis’s Foundation Plant Service) Zinfandel and Chardonnay stocks have their origins in those trials. After Simonton’s death in 1882, his vines fell on hard times. When Lee bought his land a hundred years later, a neighbor was picking what little there was for making home wine in San Francisco.

Although vineyards were not part of Lee’s Texas childhood, he wasn’t a stranger to agriculture. His dad was a successful Houston businessman who raised registered red Brahmas on a cattle ranch outside the city. After going to high school on the East Coast, Lee spent over a year in Provence in the country and still has vivid recollections of a first garden there—lavender, truffles and grapes (Lee’s mother was responsible for Lee and his siblings speaking French before they learned English). Lee next majored in agriculture at University of Arizona, preferring



Arizona’s emphasis on horticulture to Texas’ agronomy. The summer of his junior year, Lee visited Northern California at the invitation of a girl from Inverness. Standing on the deck of Sterling Winery looking over Napa Valley Lee said, “Boom! The lights went on: an agrarian Yosemite, a nature-agriculture interface.” Lee would grow grapes. He sought out the Wine Institute in San Francisco, where he met Maynard Amerine, before returning to Arizona.

After graduation, Lee married and took his bride to France. They visited Bordeaux, Alsace and Burgundy and were introduced to white wines by Chevaliers de Tasse de Vin. Lee was determined to stay and learn. Ten people and nine doors later, the Burgundian Jacques Seysses welcomed him to his Domaine Dujac. Jacques’ son Jeremy had been born the day Lee knocked on the door. Dujac was then a 2,000 case production winery with three employees and Lee worked in both the vineyard and the winery for almost a year. Meanwhile, Lee wrote Maynard asking what to do next. Maynard advised UC Davis. At Davis, Lee was sure his calling was Pinot Noir. He spent a year and a half working in the Willamette Valley before setting out to find land of his own.

Today, Hudson Vineyards has 54 vineyard blocks on 180 acres (30 are fallow) in

Carneros planted not only to Pinot Noir but also to Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Viognier, and Roussanne as well as Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Grenache, Petit Sirah and Barbera, and 32 client-wineries. A handful of clients have been with Hudson for twenty years, ten for ten years. The relationships vary, although Lee offers an invitation to visit throughout year. Hudson sells Chardonnay to Etude, Kongsgaard, Swanson and Patz & Hall, sometimes to Lewis and TOR, and vineyard-designated fruit to Kistler, Ramey and Kesner and, since 2003, Hudson Vineyards. Since 2004, 350 cases of Hudson Chardonnay and 150 of its Syrah have been made at White Rock under the eye of Chris Vandendriessche, with John Kongsgaard consulting.

As a grower, Lee finds Chardonnay a break-even variety at two and a half to three tons an acre and has no plans to plant more. Lee says you have to figure the gross per acre basis, make and hit the target; that it is a yield-driven issue. Vine labor used to average two man hours an acre or 85 to 90 hours a year; it's now Hudson's third most expensive cost after harvest and pruning, because there are so many more manipulations among the vines—fruit zone thinning, second and third leaf thinning, shoot manipulation. Hudson's hiring of seasonal employees has gone down as quality and input have gone

up: a thousand hands provide 260 hours an acre per year. In hindsight Lee'd say the best choice of what to grow would have to be high quality, interesting and flavorful, with price structure. In 2000 he says the big news from Copia was that there were 3,000 brands of wine from California.



In the 1930's Carneros was planted to mostly mixed reds with a scattering of Zinfandel. Louis M. Martini was the only vintner actively managing vineyard there. He and André Tchelistcheff were having success with Pinot Noir at Stanly Ranch. In the 1960's Ira Lee and René di Rosa pretty much redeveloped Carneros with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Lee notes that in 1968 there were just 290 acres

of Chardonnay planted in all of California. He began to plant in 1983. It was a "seat of the pants" operation—Lee found he had plenty of education but not much training. André helped him both as a friend and an advisor, plus workers from Mare Island. In 1984 he planted 20 acres of Curtis Ranch Chardonnay, but he didn't like its cluster morphology: too big, too tight and rot prone. He found a rot resistant, shot Heritage Wente clone in Alexander Valley. He also planted a Bob Young selection farmed by Jim Sangiacomo. Lee says the Sangiacomos and the Youngs were great farmers and a real inspiration to him.

In 1986 Lee planted Merlot after tasting a "wow" factor in a 1978 Winery Lake Merlot with John Kongsgaard; he also planted Cabernet Franc from Tokalon and Volker Eisele. His biggest planting, 30 acres, was in 1989. He put in Merlot, ten acres of Syrah (from Durrell Vineyards), Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. His first clients were classmates from UC Davis: John Kongsgaard, Larry Turley, John Williams, Peter Newton, Dick Ward and David Graves. To plant, Lee would ask around, at Domaine Carneros, at Cuvaision and emulate what they did. If it wasn't right he'd pull it up and do it again for he is a perfectionist who loves excellence. Lee ruefully remembers his first irrigation system as a disaster. He stopped his tractoring

in the late 1980's but remained vineyard foreman until 2000. In 1993, inspired by Joe Phelps, Lee planted an acre of Viognier as well as more Chardonnay, Syrah and Pinot Noir. Pinot Gris, a hard variety for him, went in in 1996. Lee would talk with Tony Soter, Bob Long and Richard Mendelson and design his blocks based on those communications. Additional plantings were made in 1999 and 2000, when Jason Kesner took over as Vineyard Manager. Replantings are now underway. The 1983 and 1984 have been pulled; the oldest vines today are from 1986.

Plant density has increased because of VSP (vertical shoot position) trellising. Zack Berkowitz at Domaine Chandon was a mentor for this change in 1986—Chandon was converting to trellising at the same time. Soil type, selection, scion, and pruning style all affect vine care. Vines were spur or cane pruned in Napa Valley in the 1960's. This changed to cordon in the 1970's; cordon is great for many kinds of vines but is not a universal system. Hudson began head suckering in 1990 using a French model after it found rot in its Pinot Noir. The technique provides air flow and rot control. In 1994 Hudson began cane pruning for the first time and has since gone from 100% cordon-pruned to one half cane-pruned vines.

Hudson carefully and thoroughly considers the social, economic and BTU valuations of all its vineyard practices. Its pesticide and herbicide use is down 75%. Pesticides must be registered organic and environmentally safe and are used to eliminate backbreaking labor wherever the ground dictates. Herbicides have gone from broad, intense and pre-emergent to no pre-emergent and Round Up late, in compensation for mechanical and human cultivation. Hudson's integrated pest management is based on economic thresholds of population, climate, life cycle and the variety of great tools that have become available in the last 20 years. Stylet-Oil (a fine mineral oil mixed with water) is applied every 10 to 14 days from April 1 to June 20. Coverage takes a lot more time than, say, dusting, but the oil helps control botrytis, mildew, spider mites and thrips, and smothers phomopsis—a damp weather fungal disease. Compost production has increased forty or fifty times to enable Hudson to apply 2,000 tons to a quarter of its vineyards each year. It plans to compost at more than one location to reduce transportation costs of fuel and time.

Setbacks from end posts for tractor turn-arounds and seasonal creeks are generous. To prevent erosion as well as nourish the soil, no vine row goes into the winter bare. Half

are in sod and half get green manure. Green manures are quite sustainable—a low volume of seeds provides an enormous volume of biomass. Seeds are sown as early as possible after harvest in order to germinate when the ground is still warm. Because Hudson is at the edge of oak woodlands and its fencing is porous, there is lots of habitat within the vineyards for coyotes, coons and deer. Swallows, titmice and mergansers were working a large pond behind the vineyard offices on a rainy day in March.

Summer interns occasionally come for viticulture and one from Hudson has gone to Burgundy. Lee says for now, wine and vineyard information is two-way among Australia, South Africa and California as well as France. Hudson is currently developing vegetable crops in addition to vineyard, and has four acres devoted to research and development of field-raised pigs. The plan is to cut, wrap and deliver 150 pigs a year as fresh sausage, salami, a half or whole pig directly to the local consumer. Lee's children have all helped out on the ranch. About their future there Lee says one is very interested, one is so-so, and one is too young to know. ■