

This family tree is a grapevine: The Meyers of Meyer Family Cellars

Karen Meyer's passion for enology took her to countries far from her home in Western Australia; Napa Valley native Matt Meyer also traveled to distant harvests in the quest to master his craft.

Matt even spent time in Australia, years before meeting Karen during the 1999 crush at Argyle Winery in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Once the harvest was over, the two young friends went their separate ways – for a while. Karen had more travels ahead on her way to becoming a vintner; Matt had a master's degree to earn, and a lot to live up to as the son of Napa's larger-than-life Justin Meyer, co-founder of Silver Oak Cellars.

But love, like winemaking, makes little of distances. Karen found Matt a harvest job in New Zealand for the 2004 crush. Later that year Karen joined Matt at Meyer Family Cellars, in the Yorkville Highlands district of Mendocino County's remote Anderson Valley wine region.

It's a small operation – literally a “mom and pop” winery, with just three employees. But Karen knew what she was getting into. Her parents owned a wine shop in Perth, Western Australia, so she learned early in life what it takes to run a family business: abundant time, boundless energy and passionate commitment.

“It's more than just a job; it's all-consuming,” she says. “Our lives and the winery are so intertwined.”

A glance into the spotless Meyer Family barrel room makes her meaning clear: A stroller and play chair for the couple's little daughter Sidney share space with the family forklift and a pair of friendly felines named Sonny and Cher.

The Meyers live over their winery, where Matt and Karen work closely together to make syrah, cabernet sauvignon and aged tawny port. For the first year of Sidney's life, it wasn't unusual to see her sleeping in her stroller while Karen operated the family fork lift.

“She was born just before crush, so she's spent a lot of time in the cellar,” Karen says. “I don't think she realizes she's at a winery,” adds Matt.

Famous grandparents

She may not realize it yet, but little Sidney is not just any winery baby. Her grandparents, Justin and Bonny Meyer, made California winemaking history at their Silver Oak Cellars in Oakville, Napa Valley.

Justin Meyer, the vintner whose cabernet sauvignons made Silver Oak the valley's first cult winery, learned his craft as a member of the Christian Brothers in St. Helena, where he was groomed to succeed the famed Brother Timothy in making the order's wine.

His love for life led Meyer out of religious orders in the early 1970s, when he married and co-founded Silver Oak Cellars with Bonny. The couple raised three children while establishing Silver Oak's reputation as the Napa Valley's preeminent cabernet house.

“I probably got dropped off by the school bus more often at the winery than at home, because that's where my parents were,” says Matt, who didn't realize what a destination Silver Oak had become until major-league baseball players began stopping by.

“That made an impression on me more than anything, because I really liked baseball,” he recalls.

Matt also enjoyed the atmosphere at Silver Oak, where his parents and their partners shared their success with the staff, taking everyone – families and all – to Hawaii one year as thanks for their service.



“Everybody seemed to be very, very happy to work there,” he recalls. “In 25 or 30 years, only a couple of people left.”

“And I really enjoyed the people, they were a lot of fun to hang out with. I find that in general, in the wine business, people are more easygoing. It’s just a nice industry.”

A legacy of port and cab, a future for syrah

In 1987, Justin and Bonny introduced their Meyer Family brand with a tawny port, aged and blended for up to eight years before release. Unlike vintage ports, Meyer Family is one of the few in the U.S. made in the solera style more commonly associated with sherry: New zinfandel from old vines is blended in each year for the five to six years it spends in barrels.

Once the port is bottled, another three years will pass before it is released for sale. The result of this patient aging is a silky and fragrant port with warm-spice aromas and a long, concentrated finish. The port remains Meyer Family’s signature wine.

In the late 1990s, Justin and Matt purchased the winery in Yorkville Highlands. “I was kind of keen on syrah, because I had just come back from Australia two years prior and I’d tried a lot of shiraz there that I really liked,” Matt says.

Syrah (known Down Under as shiraz) needs low nighttime temperatures or it will lose the acid needed for a well-balanced wine; cool night air, drawn in from the foggy Mendocino coast through the Anderson Valley, makes Yorkville Highlands the ideal spot.

First buying grapes from other Mendocino regions, the Meyers began encouraging their neighbors to plant syrah, and now have eight vineyards supplying their winery. This year, they’ll no longer need to go outside the Yorkville Highlands appellation for their grapes: Matt can work with local vineyards, which he believes will produce the fruit for a truly exceptional syrah.



“The wines have been getting better each year,” he says. “We’re very actively developing the style.”

“Actively,” for this couple, means every step of the way – from the vines’ first budding to aging and bottling the wine. While Matt spends more of his time in the field – he studied horticulture and agronomy while earning his 2004 master’s degree in viticulture from the University of California, Davis, and now co-chairs the Yorkville Highlands Growers and Vintners Association – Karen’s hands-on work takes place in the cellar.

“I really like the production side of things, so I try to keep out of the office and in the winery as much as possible,” she says.

Aiming for a food-friendly syrah that perfectly expresses the Yorkville Highlands region – “Good acid, nice structure, but on the elegant side,” as Karen puts it – the Meyers strive to keep the syrah’s alcohol level as low as possible, usually around 14 percent by volume. The 2003 is just 13.5 percent alcohol by volume.

Meyer Family Cellars’ current release, the 2003 Mendocino County syrah, displays an easy balance of fruit and acidity that pairs well with pork, duck and lamb. Matt recommends drinking it now, or holding it for a couple of years – as he and Karen continue to develop the Meyer Family style, it could become collectable for vertical tastings down the road.

The couple also plans to release an Oakville cabernet sauvignon, sourced from the Meyer family’s four-acre Bonny’s Vineyard that produced one of Silver Oak’s most sought-after cabs until demand overwhelmed supply; its last vintage was 1991. Matt’s parents sold their half of Silver Oak to their partners in 2000, and Justin Meyer passed away in 2002. But with Justin’s port in the cellar and Bonny’s Vineyard awaiting release, Matt and Karen – and Sidney – can celebrate their family’s history while making their own mark on a new century of winemaking.