

Dana Estates

Rutherford, California

A DYNASTY TAKES TIME TO BUILD.

almost impossible even to make appointments with them,” says his son-in-law and U.S. family representative, Jae Chun. “He had to follow them to charity auctions and sit with them” just to get an audience.

Lee kept coming back, though, and eventually convinced vintners he wasn't going away. Modest allocations of wine followed. “Phelps was the very first,” Chun reports. “It took 10 years to get Kistler.” Ultimately Lee brought Harlan Estate, Colgin Cellars, and many others to Korea. “Now people are clamoring to become part of the portfolio,” says Perry, as interest in the Asian markets has skyrocketed.

Jae Chun and Hi Sang Lee (left); entrance to Dana Estates (below).

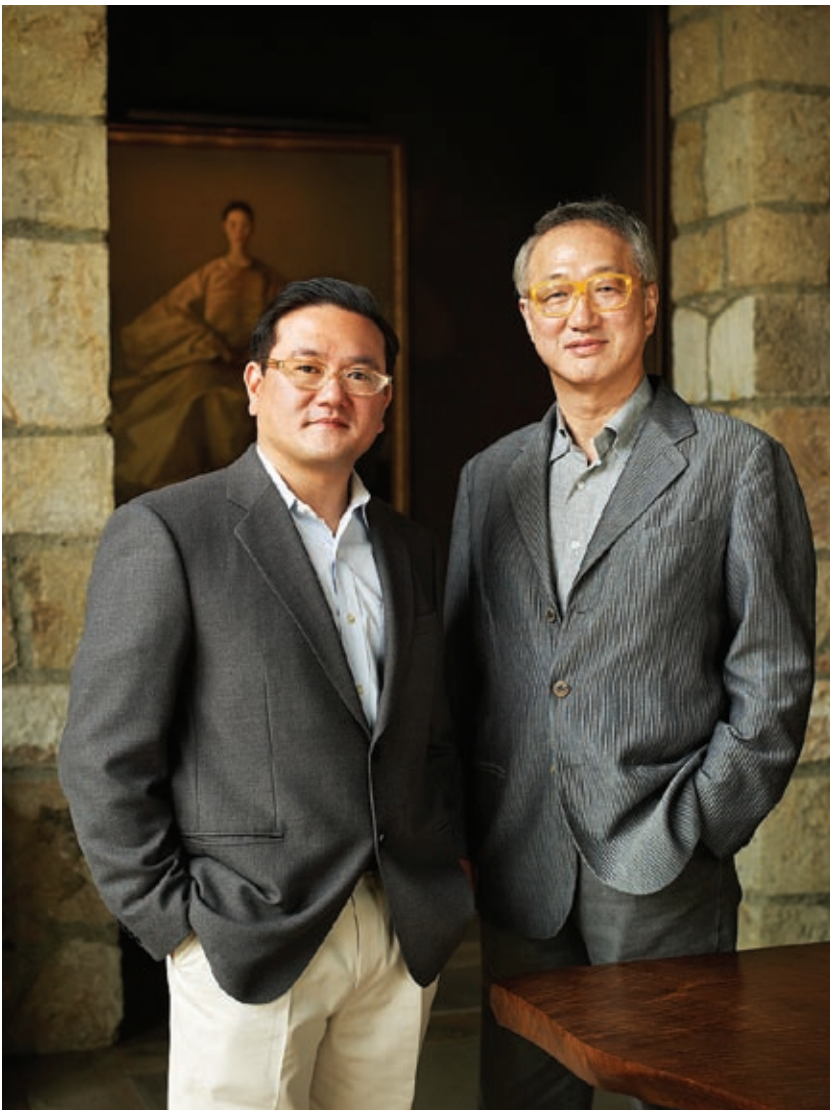


Photo courtesy of Dana Estates (left); photo by Erhard Pfeiffer (right)

BEN NARASIN

“Mr. Lee is 65, and assuming he lives a long, healthy life, he won't live to see a return on his investment,” says general manager Pete Perry of Dana Estates, Napa's newest cult-wine contender. “That will go to his heirs.” Hi Sang Lee isn't the first affluent enophile to hit Napa Valley, but he has one quality that stands out: patience.

Lee built the third-largest food importer in Korea, Nara Food. He came to Napa in the 1990s to find premium California wines for his business and was consistently, if politely, refused. “Some of his best friends now were

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WINERY SPOTLIGHT

Dana is actually Da Na, pronounced “Don-na.” “It means ‘spirit of generosity’ in Sanskrit,” Chun explains, and indeed, Dana is intended to be Lee’s wine legacy. To produce a quality comparable to those cult Cabs he sought out in the past, Lee has accumulated three exceptional properties: Helms, Hershey, and Lotus. The estate itself, where Helms is grown, nestles at the base of the Mayacamas Mountains in Rutherford, Calif. Hershey and Lotus are planted on rocky Howell Mountain soils. All three vineyards are farmed organically, and they’re “kicking around going biodynamic,” says Perry.

The winery doesn’t seek to attract visitors. Its modest gates open only to the trade and the eternally wait-listed direct buyers. If you don’t know where it is, you’ll be lucky to find it at all. There’s no sign on the road, and the only indication that you’re in the right place is the small type on the call box.

Dana is no temple of ostentation; its quiet luxuries are those of space and attention to detail. For example, the 20,000-square-foot barrel room is far larger than its case production (roughly 600 per year) would demand; that’s because no barrels are stacked. Three different



Courtyard (above) and dining room (below) of Dana Estates.



Photos by Erhard Pfeiffer

types of fermentation vessels are used to reflect each property’s distinctive character. With Lotus, “the strength and power of the wine makes bringing the fruit forward challenging,” says Cameron Vawter, director of production. It’s fermented primarily in concrete because that “really helped focus the fruit.” Concrete “works best with small berries,” adds Perry; it “helps pop and brighten.” Helms is typically fermented in 5-ton oak uprights—polished and perfectly new—which radiate a richness of investment to match the \$325-per-bottle price. The wine is punched down by hand to ensure the gentlest possible treatment. By contrast, Hershey is fermented in small oak barriques. The process is clean and simple: whole berries go in, and the fermented wine is racked off and returned to the barrels for aging. OXO rollers allow the team to gently turn the barrels three times a day during fermentation.

Like any super-premium wine, Dana needed a super-premium winemaker. Lee found one in the unassuming Philippe Melka, who counts among a handful of superstars sought out by both the vanity-vineyard set and the serious contenders for cult fame. His dedication and talent have delivered a long series of successful wines—and high scores. And his relationship with Lee will likely only further his reputation, since he is also making his own wine on the property.



OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Cabernet Sauvignon Helms Vineyard,
Rutherford, Napa Valley 2007 \$275

Dark squid ink meets Welch's-jelly plum at the center of the glass, lightening to a blood-bright rim. The nose is slightly hot, featuring dark cherry dusted in cacao and mocha with a touch of green olive. A soft-textured palate offers mocha, cherry, pomegranate, juicy dark-red fruits, and dark wild plum, backed by sweet dark chocolate, tamarind, and a bit of cassis. The soft, lingering, warming finish hints of roasted cacao and mocha.

Cabernet Sauvignon Helms Vineyard,
Rutherford, Napa Valley 2008 \$325

The '08 Helms exhibits the hue of dark, rich wild-plum skin. Fresh, pleasant aromas of blue and black fruits lead to similar flavors in the mouth, along with cherry, almost plummy notes. Lush and velvety on entry, the wine becomes slightly rustic in the midpalate. A beautiful, lengthy finish reemphasizes the blue and black fruits.

Cabernet Sauvignon Hershey Vineyard,
Howell Mountain, Napa Valley 2007 \$275

Ranging from blood to ruby in color, the Hershey shows a slightly sweet nose tinged with vanilla and moderate alcohol. The palate is brothy at first, with timid elements of roasted meat followed by flavors of dark plum, black cherry, and cacao nibs. The broth and alcohol carry through on a reasonably long finish.

Cabernet Sauvignon Lotus Vineyard,
Napa Valley 2007 \$275

The color is that of a fully ripened wild plum—almost black, with an edge between blood and ruby and an accompanying glint of luxury. A whiff of butterscotch distinguishes this wine from the others, but the nose is dominated by notes of vanilla and bright, ripe, almost tropical fruit. A mouthful of tamarind-boysenberry-huckleberry jam is supported by bright acidity and wonderfully interwoven tannins. Flavors of dark cherry, bright red cherry, and pomegranate persist on a pleasant, lasting, warming finish.

Cabernet Sauvignon Lotus Vineyard,
Napa Valley 2008 \$325

Slightly darker than the '08 Helms, the Lotus gives the appearance of highly polished garnet. The nose is mildly herbaceous, but still rather plummy. Slightly drying tannins envelop flavors of lead pencil, coffee, and spice. This is a fully structured, excellent food wine—probably made for a Porterhouse, but also good with duck.

Prices are current estimated retail.



Winemaker Philippe Melka (top left); Dana Estates rotunda (top); Lotus fermentation room (above); Helms barrel room (right).



Of course, branded winemakers, top-of-the-line facilities, and careful technique don't assure an exceptional wine any more than an Ivy League education guarantees a successful career, but they certainly help. At Dana, the lush, rich, deep flavors of the Cabernet Sauvignons carry through the individual qualities of the three vineyards. The wines have the regal bearing that collectors have become accustomed to. But ultimately, Dana delivers because its team demands that the wines manifest the dimensions of a dynasty, not the measure of the market. 🍷

Ben Narasin is a freelance food, wine, travel, and lifestyle writer and an online television commentator. He focuses on the sybaritic lifestyle, unique experiences, and culinary pairings. He also judges wine competitions. His website is foodlifewine.com.

Photo courtesy of Dana Estates (left); photos by Erhard Pfeiffer (right)