

# LOCAL LIFE

Thursday, October 6, 2005

CHESTNUT HILL LOCAL

Page 21

*Lori is seeing red (wine, that is)*

## Grape future in store for Hill area woman's company



Lori Sanders of Lafayette Hill and her brother, Ronnie, are seen in the offices of their company, Vine Street Imports, in one of the old Frankford Arsenal buildings in lower Northeast Philadelphia. (Photo by Len Lear)  
by LEN LEAR

Imagine Jeffrey Laurie, owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, telling you he never watches a football game, that he finds the sport boring. Imagine the owner of a steakhouse telling you he's a vegetarian. Now you can understand my shock on finding out that Lori Sanders never drinks wine.

No doubt many people never drink wine, but Lori, 41, an 18-year resident of Lafayette Hill, is chief financial officer for Vine Street Imports. The company, based in the Frankford Arsenal in lower Northeast Philadelphia, is an importer and distributor of fine wines from around the world and is the area's largest distributor of wines from Australia. And although she finds the business challenging and fascinating ("As soon as people find out what I do, they usually ask me lots of questions about wine"), Lori admits the taste of fine wines "is wasted on me ... I never drink it myself."

How, then, did this ebullient, pretty mother of two who

drinks wine as often as she travels to Jupiter become a top executive for a wine distribution and importation company? The answer begins in 1994, when Lori's father, Harold Sanders, then 60, died suddenly of an aneurism, even though "he had just had a complete physical exam and was thought to be perfectly healthy."

Lori and her brother, Ronnie, then 27, had both worked for their dad, who owned and operated Materials International, a Cherry Hill-based company that imported fabrics from the Far East and India and sold them to apparel manufacturers, home furnishing businesses and individuals who made their own clothing.

When Harold died, Ronnie inherited the fabric business as well as his dad's personal collection of 3,000 bottles of wine. "My father was a wine geek and an avid collector of Bordeaux," explained Ronnie. "When I was a kid, it was not unusual for him to open up a bottle of (Chateau) Latour or a Pomerol at the dinner table. Neither of my sisters nor my mother drank wine, so it was usually up to me and my dad to finish the bottle.

"When he died and left me his collection, my mother wanted to auction off all the wine, but I went ballistic. This collection was his legacy. It was at that time that I immersed myself in wine and wine culture." (Ronnie continued to expand his father's invaluable collection as if they were grape vines until it grew to more than 10,000 bottles.)

Meanwhile, Lori, who has an economics degree from the University of Pennsylvania and previously worked in the corporate banking and finance departments at First Pennsylvania and CoreStates banks, joined her brother in running the family-owned textile business. During her 10-year tenure, Lori negotiated investment and financial transactions and supervised annual sales of more than \$50 million for Materials International.

However, the textile business began to fade like the colors of an old shirt as more and more American clothing manufacturers like Burlington Industries and Fieldcrest Cannon went out of business, no longer able to compete with cheap labor in Third World countries.

Meanwhile, as Ronnie spent more and more time on his wine hobby, he met an Australian winemaker, Michael Twelvetree, through the internet. "One day Michael asked Ronnie in an e-mail if he would import his wines to the U.S.," said Lori. "We thought he was kidding, but he went ahead and sent us 200 cases of wine from his Two Hands Winery. At first we honestly did not believe they were coming."

Ronnie, the enthusiastic wine buff, took the cases and tried selling them to high-end restaurants, Pennsylvania state stores, independent retailers and national distributors. He was so successful that two years ago he and Lori dissolved their textile importing business to devote full-time

to Vine Street Imports, which they had formed in 1999 to sell wine.

Ronnie now spends about six months out of each year in Australia and other countries checking out new wineries and establishing relationships with winemakers. Vine Street Imports made a profit of \$65,000 in its first year, and according to Lori, "did \$800,000 in sales two years ago and will do \$5 to \$6 million this year. Our wines are now in 30 states, and by the end of this year we expect to be in 48 states."

"We are out there pushing every day," added Ronnie. "This is the kind of business where if you don't push, you'll get pushed out of the way. If a restaurant has 30 wines on its wine list and I can get five of them, that's five placements my competition has lost. There's not an unlimited amount of business. It's actually very limited."

Vine Street Imports' wines are not exactly Yellow Tail (the top-selling Australian wine in the U.S., which retails for about \$7 or \$8). Some are between \$10 and \$20, like Lucky Country Shiraz-Cabernet (\$14.49), and some are very expensive but smooth as velvet and very lush, like Bindi Pinot Noir, 2004 (\$75), Stella's Garden Shiraz (\$50) and Lost Highway Project '03, Barossa Old Vine Shiraz (\$75).

Ronnie attributes the ever-growing popularity of Australian wines in the U.S. to three factors: "First is price. Australian wines remain very competitive, even when the Euro is strong. Secondly, Americans like their big flavors, which are similar to California wines. Finally, they're a mouthful. High alcohol, high in oak, big fruit. Americans love them."

For more information, call 215-533-9463 or visit [www.vsimports.com](http://www.vsimports.com)

(Lori lives in the Andorra Woods section of Lafayette Hill with her husband, Michael Simon, a native of Overbrook Park, and children Stephanie, 16, a junior at Plymouth Whitmarsh High School, and Matt, 13, an eighth grader at Colonial Middle School.)

One of Lori's high-end products, Bindi Pinot Noir 2004, is sold in finely crafted, timber silk-screened six-pack boxes. The artwork was created by Justin Hampton, who has illustrated posters for Bob Dylan and many other prominent rock musicians.

