

# LOLA

## From Anna Maria Island to Calistoga: The Odyssey of Seth Cripe

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Old souls have a way about them: they're at ease, they're empathetic, they're suspicious, they pay attention. Comfortable navigating interior and multiple contradictions, these rare birds are interesting to be around. When I meet Seth Cripe for the first time, my immediate sense is that he possesses an old soul. One superpower of old souls is their ability to be seen and to see others; they see themselves as a part of the world, rather than apart from the world. Suspending my aversion for a moment for woo-woo type New Age jargon, I feel seen as a human being by Cripe the first time we shake hands.

I meet up with Cripe, 41, at the LOLA house in downtown Calistoga, the headquarters and tasting room of the [LOLA brand](#) which Cripe founded in 2008. By turns guarded and unguarded, Cripe shows me briefly around the small brick home where he receives customers, before we hop in his car and take off to visit a few of the vineyards from which he sources fruit. Mutually comfortable with silence, we drive along Napa Valley's famed Hwy. 29 for a time, enjoying the crisp, verdant morning, not speaking at all. Cripe finally interrupts the silence to ask if the temperature in the car is okay.

Just as Cripe points out a vineyard block of old-vine Chenin Blanc that he enjoys working with, I ask that first predictable question that all fledgling wine writers probably ask winemakers: “So, how’d you get into wine?” He starts modestly by talking about his childhood, and it becomes evident early on in our day together that Cripe’s wine brand is more than just a business; it represents his vocation, his destiny. “I had a pretty difficult childhood,” he begins. As we drive past the gleaming white façade of Sterling Winery atop a nearby hill, I learn that Cripe’s parents were divorced when he was quite young, and by the time he was eight his home life was thrown into chaos. His father suffered from severe mental illness, and when Cripe was 12 his father made the first of many suicide attempts. “Our home life just imploded,” he says. Many years later his father would succeed in committing suicide. Because mental illness is still heavily stigmatized in our society, I ask Cripe if I can mention this private family story in my article. “Yes. It is certainly a big part of who I am and how I’ve gotten to this point in my life.”



“My dad stood for things, and had a strong sense of justice,” he continues. “I think I got that from him; I love the idea of people standing for something that they believe in. I’m much more understated or insecure or something, but I aspire to at least stand for something.” His father, he tells me, also had great taste in music, and introduced him to a broad range of music, including protest songs, which Cripe admires. “Bob Dylan. John Lennon. Bob Marley. Marley said so much in his music. I listen to his lyrics and I wonder, how did he write music like that?” He also spends a fair amount of time listening to jazz and the traditional Portuguese musical form, Fado.

When he was 12, Cripe left the family home on Anna Maria Island, off the coast of Florida, and moved in with an older brother who lived in the nearby fishing village of Cortez. Three old Concord grape vines, planted on the island in the 1800s by settlers, sparked Cripe’s imagination. He found himself wondering how those vines might translate into wine, a beverage he was hearing about. “I grew up on the ocean, and all my friends were fishermen. I have always been really connected to nature,” says Cripe, who contends that his discovery of wine only deepened his connection with the natural world.

By the time he was 13, he was reading every wine book he could get his hands on, even diving into topics like fermentation, how different grapes grew in different terroirs around the world and the culture of wine. “Wine became my escape,” he says. “I really don’t feel like I had a lot of choices. I had no home to go back to.” He also found an escape in reading, which he did voraciously, beginning at that tender age to delve into the classics. “I loved Walt Whitman—the nature aspect. Thoreau. John Muir. And that was when I discovered Mark Twain.”

Never returning to school, at 13 he took a job washing dishes and bussing tables at Beach Bistro, one of Florida's top restaurants, recognized at the time for its extensive wine list. Owner Sean Murphy encouraged Cripe to familiarize himself with the many wines on the Bistro's list, championing his nascent interest in wine. Two years later, at 15, he started experimenting with winemaking, picking the Concord grapes from those ancient vines. Entirely self-taught, he delved even deeper into the inner workings of fermentation and élevage.

Fortuitously, the Long Boat Key Wine Festival (no longer in existence) was held at the Beach Bistro. Wildly popular at the time, the festival attracted winemakers from around the world. It was there that the young Cripe met vintner Clark Swanson of Napa Valley's Swanson Vineyards, a well-regarded bon vivant who has for decades added a unique cultural flair all his own to Napa Valley's enological landscape. "I worked up the courage to come out of the kitchen and introduce myself. I told him I'd love to come out and visit and learn more about winemaking in Napa, and so Clark gave me his business card."

Cripe and Swanson kept in touch for a couple of years, and by the time Cripes was 17 he'd saved up enough money for a beat-up Subaru and, with an additional \$1,200 in his pocket, he drove straight out to the Napa Valley. He set aside \$300 in the glove box, allotting just a little extra money so that he could see places he'd always wanted to visit: New Orleans, a few National Parks...He hiked along the Continental Divide.

Swanson welcomed Cripe with opened arms and introduced him to Swanson's winemaker at the time, Marco Cappelli, who became a major influence on the young Cripe. "He had no television, spoke four languages, read a lot. And so I did the same, just reading a lot of literature. Cripe was invited to live on the Swanson property, where he remained for three years, with a one-year break during which he worked in Australia.

Our talk is interrupted by a vineyard stop—a purely nostalgic one. Cripe drives out to see the small guest house where he lived while he worked at Swanson. From there he drives us out the Rutherford sub-appellation to show me Caymus Vineyards where, after leaving Swanson, he took a job in the cellar, remaining there for seven years. Every winter while he worked at Caymus, Chuck Wagner, owner and winemaker, sent the young Cripe to Burgundy for four months so that he could learn about high-density planting and cellar practices. "France is the leader in multi-function machines—tractors that go over the row, have sprayers in the back, all of these attachments that are part of the same tractor. We brought a lot of that technology over from there. Caymus and Opus One brought the first Bobards to the Napa Valley." France's Bobard remains a leader in high-clearance tractors, harvesting machines and other vineyard equipment that are able to navigate narrow vineyard rows.

After leaving Caymus, Cripe made time to return to an original love—surfing—this time off the Sonoma Coast. "I'm 41, but I still surf Waimea and Mavericks," he tells me. A love of the Sonoma Coast and a long-standing relationship with a Pinot Noir grower on Bloomfield Road in Sebastopol led to the founding of LOLA in 2008. The first wine Cripe made under his LOLA label was a low-sulfur, natural wine that he could not sell at the time. This was over a decade before natural wine would become popular stateside. "I wanted to stand for quality. I wanted to make wines that have integrity and purity at good price points that I could afford to drink. That caused an issue as well with that style of wine. I priced it at \$30.00, and at that time tastemakers did not consider relatively affordable pinots as seriously as more expensive ones." This was just before the financial crash, when words like "allocation" and "luxury" were still bandied about cavalierly and luxury wines were considered more nuanced than affordable ones. "It's just not me to be like, the 'elite' side of wine," he says.



“We’ve changed the style of our wines a little bit,” Cripe says. “They’re still under-ripe, high acid, not a lot of oak, but they’re a little more finessed now. Still—it’s been a real struggle. It’s just very hard to create an honest product, hand-made, that is affordable.” More than a decade later, Cripe’s Sonoma Coast Chardonnay, a palate-invigorating white wine, is priced at \$22.00. In that pricing space, LOLA wines are often competing with heavily oaked, slightly sweet Chardonnays. I have always found it curious that the trade, particularly sommeliers, are excited when they find a good value from Burgundy, Cornas, Jura or the Loire. “I wish American winemakers would do that,” they’ll say about the affordable price points. Then, when true American vignerons price their wines similarly, influencers in the trade are reluctant to even try them, assuming incorrectly that a \$22.00 bottle of Chardonnay from California must be a sweet, heavily-oaked, vanilla-like, one-dimensional wine.

At one of his lowest moments, early on in 2009, just a year into his brand, Cripe was sitting on 700 cases of Pinot Noir that hadn’t sold. He was looking at the reality he’d have to fold his barely launched brand and walk away from a dream. A friend of his at the time—whom he refers to as JP, a restaurant co-owner that mentored him in his youth in Florida—fell ill of liver disease and died shortly after his diagnosis. Unbeknownst to Cripe, before he passed, JP introduced LOLA wines to a Florida distributor, who, following JP’s death, called Cripe and placed a purchase order for all 700 cases. This one single order rescued LOLA and set into motion a series of events that would lead to Cripe’s other business, Cortez Bottarga.

Bottarga is salt-cured and sun dried caviar from the grey mullet. It all originates domestically near Cripe’s childhood home on Anna Maria Island, and has been an economic boom to the local fisherman of Cortez. While making frequent market-visits to Florida to help move those 700 cases he’d just sold, the bottarga business he had started with his brother modestly two years earlier really began to take off. “We’re the only producer in the U.S.,” Cripe says. “Ironically, I guess, we’ve never made one phone call to sell that product. And we can’t make it fast enough. It’s really helped with LOLA, because it’s opened up a network of restaurants.” Food lovers will recognize the names of several chefs for whom Cortez Bottarga has become a staple. They include Thomas Keller (The French Laundry, Per Se), Christopher Kostow (The Restaurant at Meadowood), Frank Stitt III (Highlands Grill, Bottega), Michael White (Marea, Ai Fiori), Daniel Boulud (Daniel, Café Boulud, Bar Boulud), Justin Smillie (Il Buco Alimentari, Upland), Sean Brock (Husk), Donald Link (Herbsaint, Pesce) and more too numerous to list.

Cripe and I have been tootling around in his car for a while, visiting vineyard sources, so we decide to head back to the LOLA house and try his wines, including both the LOLA Collection and his Artisanal Series. Cripe brings a generous portion of bottarga to the table, along with salted butter and a simple baguette. After

spreading a layer of butter on the bread first, at Cripe's direction, I add a few glistening, saffron colored pieces of botargga atop the bread. It's surprisingly very similar in taste to Osetra caviar; imagine for a moment a very fine Osetra-grade caviar with the consistency of a medium-to-slightly hard cheese, and what you have is a hedonistic, mouthful of salty ocean brine and life. If you enjoy caviar, particularly Osetra-grade, Cortez Bottarga is worth seeking out. Cripe and his brother have expanded their line of products to include Gulf Tuna Mojama, a locally canned tuna, as well as locally canned octopus and other seafood conservas from Cortez, all offered for sale at the LOLA house. "We're trying to add some more old world artisanal Euro-flare to the Napa Valley, showcasing our wines and seafood conservas from where I grew up."



### **Tasting Highlights:**

Across the board, the wines of LOLA suit my personal palate. Refreshing to the nose and palate, they uniformly possess a healthy dose of natural acid, taste bright and invigorating, and are relatively affordable. I can't say there was one in the bunch I didn't care for, but here are some of the stand-outs for me:

**2017 LOLA Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast:** There's a noticeable hint of brine and freshly cut apple on this Chardonnay. Refreshing and balanced, it's great with food or as a crisp glass of wine to enjoy while you're cooking dinner. Save some for your guests, is what I've learned. \$22.00

**2017 LOLA Pinot Noir, California:** A blend of vineyard sources from Monterey, Russian River Valley, the Sonoma Coast and Mendocino, this wine has terrific texture and structure. A serious and considered Pinot Noir, it exhibits fresh, bright high-toned blue and black fruits on the nose and palate, as well as refined notes of cedar and petrichor. Refreshingly balanced. \$22.00

**2018 LOLA Artisanal Series Monterey Dry Riesling:** A nuanced, unpredictable white wine, this Riesling knocked my socks off, but it may not be for everybody. There's 30% skin-contact on this wine, and it may be best understood and appreciated by folks who don't mind being challenged when it comes to concepts like typicity and varietal character. It's unmistakably a riesling, but unlike others I've had from California. The nose on this wine evolves continually, and demonstrates everything from petrol to summer jasmine and tangerine. \$32.00

**2018 LOLA Artisanal Series, St. Helena Chenin Blanc:** This invigorating, inviting Chenin Blanc found its provenance just north of St. Helena, growing on 45-year-old vines. Exuberant, aromatic and with a long finish,

this is an ideal wine for the table; palate cleansing, high in acid, and balanced to accompany a meal, rather than overpower it. \$38.00

**2018 LOLA Artisanal Series, St. Helena Zinfandel:** A long-time fan of Zinfandel, this was my favorite red wine in the LOLA line up. Cripe has produced an elegant, electric Zinfandel with nuanced aromatics that by turns recall a Redwood grove, briar patch fruit and the perfectly aged cigar under an earthy Maduro leaf.

[R.H. Drexel for Robert Parker's Wine Advocate | January 27, 2020](#)