



Don and Rhonda Carano

Brave New World

Exciting things are happening at Sonoma's Ferrari-Carano winery.

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The drive along the Dry Creek Road offered a curving one-lane highway with a view that could make even the most obdurate of urbanites grateful for natural beauty. Advancing further, up a slight hill, on the left about ten miles from Route 101 is Oz, or Villa Fiore, the dream estate and residence of Don and Rhonda Carano of Ferrari-Carano.

Villa Fiore (house of flowers) is Edenic and aptly named, with poetic landscapes, flowers, cork trees, waterfalls, gardens of various styles, meditative and meandering walkways worthy of the spiritual life. The architecture is immense, not in size but in majesty. The curious thing is that it looks so natural, almost as if nature came to it, not the other way around. It's not another Xanadu, not another monument to arrogance and wealth which more than dot the Sonoma/Napa winescape. Villa Fiore is a Renaissance-Tuscan creation that speaks to tradition, to Italy, to art, to fertility, to tradition.

Ferrari-Carano is one of the most gorgeous paradisaical wine properties anywhere. The Caranos founded the winery in 1981. Hotel keepers from Reno armed with law, nutrition and marketing degrees — and money, lots of it — the Caranos came, saw, and conquered. (Not long ago they furthered their conquest buying and refurbishing the lovely Vintner's Inn in Santa Rosa, which is also one of the finest John Ash dining spots in northern California.) By 1985 George Bursick became winemaker producing the expected red and white varietals, which developed into superior quality with virtually each vintage. Fame followed.

Change and continuing fame are now part of the Ferrari-Carano profile. Winemaker Bursick has left for J Vineyards, replaced by his assistants Sarah Quider (formerly of Jordan) who handles white wines, and Aaron Piotter (formerly of Sebastiani and Franciscan) who spearheads the reds. It's youth at the helm, with Quider-Piotter representing a new generation, providing new sparks for the expanding Carano vision. The varietals are largely the same, but better. What's even finer are the two new red 2003 blends called PreVail Back Forty (\$80) and PreVail West Face (\$40), two wines which have given Ferrari-Carano a new image, better press, and a greater following.

Say Robert Parker, and you've said enough to attract wine attention. He had the first chance to taste the PreVail wines and was impressed, giving it a very handsome number. Then in March 2007 this magazine had its 23rd annual Best of The Best blind tasting of California Red Blends/Meritage and both PreVails prevailed (no numbers at QRW) with the 2003 Back Forty winning Best of Show, and the 2003 West Face receiving Best of The Best/Five-Stars. Since then anyone who can taste wine knows that both PreVail wines (both having virtually the same blend of 87% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Syrah, and 3% of Cabernet Franc) are some of the best new releases in California.



Sarah Quider and Aaron Plotter, winemakers



Ferrari-Carano winery

The PreVail wines join Ferrari-Carano's other portfolio of solid reds — Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Siena, and especially Tresor, a blend of five major red varietals which makes everybody's list of great vino. This is not mindless praise. The Caranos have exceptional vineyards and terroir. Vineyard management hands them winery grape gems every vintage; all the winemaker has to do is polish them, refine them — not, in winemaker speak, "screw it up." Plotter and his oenology consultant, Philippe Melka, have done brilliant work in producing wonderful blends in Sonoma. But there's more going at the winery. It's clear that the Caranos want an even greater red wine reputation that transcends what they have. Plotter's two PreVail Mountain Winery blends from Alexander Valley does this for them.

The PreVail estate is as wondrous as Villa Fiore. We've spent 30 years visiting wine caves and have seen little as extraordinary as this. The winery is adjacent to the vast underground caves spanning 436 feet and extending into the mountain

390 feet, with ideal temperature and humidity control. The caves were a Herculean effort, with excavation through solid rock, encountering fractures of earth up to 18 inches and over 100 feet long. It took several years to finish. The winery's design allows for hand-sorting of grapes, and incorporates gravity flow to avenues of French oak and stainless fermenters. There are over 45,000 square feet. The Carano's money was well spent. The proof is in the PreVail. The news is better still because the 2004 PreVail (Back Forty and West Face) are both better than the 2003s.

Ferrari-Carano has always had a fine reputation for white wines; former winemaker Bursick saw to that. There isn't much to tamper with. Quider is not about to change things, and she isn't gilding a lily, but her intention is to make the "wines richer and delicate; we have grapes with great diversity in our vineyards because we're located in several appellations, each with unique microclimates, soils, and clones. I want to show that diversity in my wines."

Liking the whites was easy. Lunching in the dining room, with their own chef cooking, overlooking the vineyards on a gorgeous day that made the toast "to health" more than a cliché, could only enrich the experience. Quider's **2006 Fume Blanc** is more colorful, tropical, and texturous than we can remember. The character of the **2006 Pinot Grigio** is light and elegant, with notes of new oak, nice feel, lemon, and firm finish. Her single vineyard **2003 Chardonnay** has just the right touch of oak, with deep golden-yellow hues, with a lip-smacking tropical fruit, vanilla, apple, lemon, and spice. The **2004 Reserve Chardonnay**, however, is her best wine, with nuances of oak, vanilla, grapefruit, and plenty of depth. It's a wine that puts to rest the complaint that all Chardonnay tastes alike. Anyone who can make white wine this good can make red wine even better, white wine being harder and more demanding. Nonetheless, the Caranos have two stellar winemakers. The winery is well positioned, with youth steering a new course. ♪