

BY BRETT ANDERSON

Ferrari-Carano 2005 Siena Red Wine and 2005 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel

IN 1979, WHEN Rhonda and Don Carano purchased 60 acres of land in Sonoma County's Alexander Valley, neither of them envisioned secondary careers (or to be more precise, tertiary ones) as winemakers. An attorney specializing in gaming-industry law, Don founded the Eldorado Hotel in Reno, his hometown. His wife, also a native of Reno and a nutritionist by training, developed the hotel's wine and food programs, transforming it into a premier culinary destination.

The couple became interested in the grapes that grew on their property and began to study viticulture at the renowned enology school at the University of California, Davis. The wine they produced was sold under their label at the Eldorado Hotel; its success there encouraged them to take a different kind of gamble: building a commercial winery. Located in Dry Creek Valley, the Estate Winery is now part of a complex that includes Villa Fiore, an elegant Mediterranean palazzo surrounded by manicured gardens that serves as Ferrari-Carano's tasting room.

But as their vineyard holdings expanded from the initial few acres to their present 1,400 (located in 19 different appellations), the Caranos determined to build a second winery in the Alexander Valley solely for the production of red wines; the whites would continue to be produced in the original facility. Since the finest red grapes invariably come from mountain vineyards, the facility would sit closer to the source and would be designed to the specific demands of sorting, fermenting and aging red wines—quite a different regimen from the whites. Two winemakers—Sarah Quider for the whites and Aaron Plotter for the reds—oversee the separate facilities.

The impact on the quality of the Ferrari-Carano red wines is apparent not only in the Cabernet Sauvignon but also in the other reds, such as the Sangiovese-based Siena 2005 (\$24). An exotic blend of 80 percent Sangiovese, 16 percent Malbec and 4 percent Zinfandel, this firm red with soft tannins offers up sweet dark-berry and red-cherry fruit, amply spiced with cinnamon, coffee and, on the finish, crème caramel.

The 2005 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$30) is a delicious reminder of why this particular varietal has become so closely identified with Sonoma. Dark, saturated and rich with boysenberry, this classic barbecue wine is jammy and packs an intense punch of vanilla, cardamom and pepper—proof indeed that the Caranos' gamble continues to pay off.

Ferrari-Carano, 707-433-6700; ferrari-carano.com. ■

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