

# Rise and Shine

Ferrari-Carano  
takes to the  
hills to discover  
Sonoma's moun-  
tain terroirs.

story and photos  
by David Gadd

Don and Rhonda  
Carano inside the  
46,000-square-foot  
caves at Ferrari-  
Carano's Mountain  
Winery Estate





**The state-of-the-art Mountain Winery Estate was conceived and built with environmental issues in mind.** (Photo courtesy Ferrari-Carano)

Geyserville makes neighboring Healdsburg look like midtown Manhattan. As I drive into this sleepy, elongated Northern Sonoma burg on a Tuesday evening at nine o'clock, there is only one open sign still lit—a corner market run by a South Asian immigrant watching a stand-up comedy special. "Funny!" he laughs, as the overweight comedian tells a lame joke about his in-laws. Geyserville is the boonies. You don't come here for the nightlife—you come for the wine.

The next morning I meet Ferrari-Carano's Marketing and Public Relations Director, Cheryl McMillan, at the nearby Jimtown Store, the general merchandise/café/antique shop that has served as the social nexus of Alexander Valley for over a century. Apologizing for her dust-covered SUV (a hazard of the trade in Sonoma wine country), Cheryl leads me straight up RockRise Mountain, high above Geyserville, to Ferrari-Carano's impressive Mountain Winery Estate.

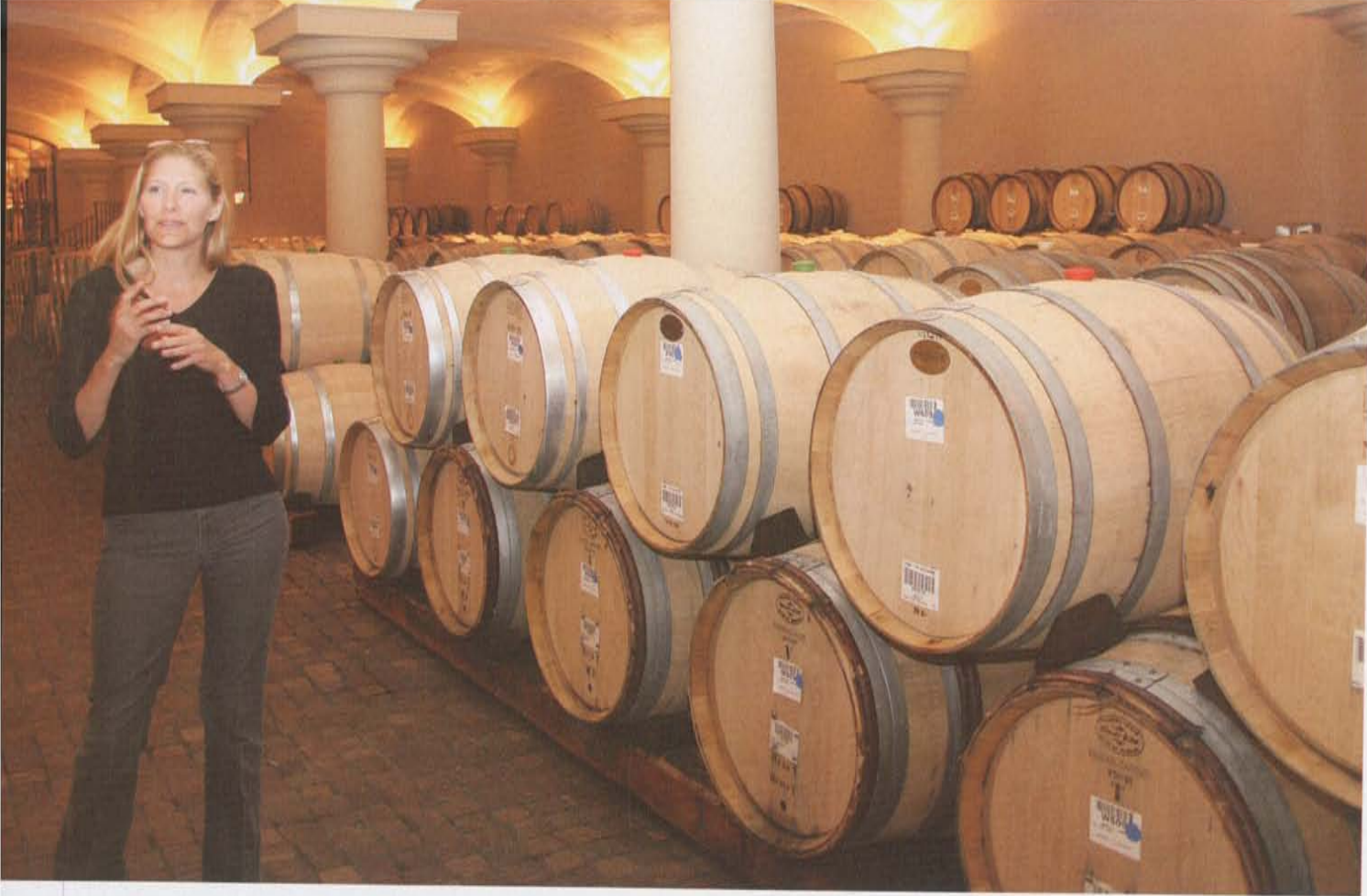
### All or Nothing

Don and Rhonda Carano don't do things by half measures. At Villa Fiore, their lavish hospitality center on the other side of Highway 101 in Dry Creek Valley, the building is modeled after a Mediterranean villa and the halls are paved with polished marble. Rhonda Carano, who has a second career as an interior designer, has placed European antiques in strategic locations in the private wing, where there's a museum-quality collection of Venetian glassware that a lucky few get to see when the Caranos entertain members of the trade.

Here at the newer 800-acre Mountain Winery Estate, they hired Nevada architect Randy Brown to design a state-of-the-art winery built from warm-toned Colorado stone and massive, carbon-hued steel girders. The winery opened in 2004. The steep road up the mountain is paved with crushed stone taken from the site and sealed with tree sap—just one of the environmentally sensitive measures that the Caranos have taken with this model property. Miniature babydoll sheep graze under the vines, keeping the vineyards tidy, and Rhonda makes honey from her own beehives.

**Mountain Fruit is key to Ferrari-Carano's red wine program.**





**Winemaker Sarah Quider explains her Chardonnay techniques in the underground barrel room.**

The gravity-feed winemaking facility, which could easily be mistaken for a NASA laboratory, is designed on a radial plan, with three concentric rings of fermentation tanks all accessible via a central rotating boom. "I've seen smaller radial-plan wineries," says Winemaker Aaron Plotter, "but there's definitely nothing on this scale." The place is so clean that a stray white five-gallon bucket, casually left beside one of the French-built wooden fermenters, sticks out like a garbage pail in an operating theater.

When I ask Don Carano how much he spent on the place, he modestly declines to name the sum, but you can bet it wasn't peanuts. "You couldn't afford to build this place today," he concedes, noting sharp rises in the price of concrete and steel. Ironically, for all the investment, the Mountain Winery Estate is not open to the public but was designed exclusively for the production of the Ferrari-Carano red wines, including those released

under the more recent PreVail label.

As impressive as the winery is, it's in the adjacent caves that the wow factor really comes into play. The 46,000 square feet of tunnels, dug into the mountainside, are home to 7,000 barrels of Ferrari-Carano wine. Lit by wrought-iron sconces and chandeliers, the long halls have a silent, monastic feel that seems appropriate to the seriousness with which the Caranos take their red wine program. "We can store three vintages at a time in here," remarks Don.

### **A Family Affair**

Aaron Plotter rides his mountain bike to work every day 16 miles from Cloverdale and up the mountain to the winery. "Going home sure is fun," laughs Plotter, the enthusiastic thirty-something who is charged with making this cutting-edge facility work as it should.

There's a family spirit at work at Ferrari-Carano, and the Caranos treat their entire staff as a part of

the whole winemaking process. The vineyard workers, some of whom have been with the Caranos for several generations, are housed and educated at company expense. "They pass the knowledge from grandfather to father to son," says Don. "You can't get that with temporary labor. We want to be vertically integrated from bottom to top."

Vineyard Manager Steve Domenichelli oversees Ferrari-Carano's 1,400 acres of vineyards in 19 different locations across five appellations in three counties. "Our vineyards are our backbone," says Rhonda. "Our strongest point is that we can direct our destiny by owning and managing our own fruit." Don agrees. "We just bought another vineyard last week," he smiles. This one, in the Mendocino Highlands AVA, is already planted to Pinot Noir.

We taste the two PreVail releases, sourced from the Caranos' two mountain properties, represented by the two sides of the capital V on