

the label. "West Face" (SRP \$50) is a Cab-Syrah blend from the LookOut Mountain vineyard at the conjunction of Alexander Valley, Knights Valley and Chalk Hill; Cab-driven sibling "Back Forty" (\$80) comes from a select plot at the Mountain Winery Estate, not far from where we're sitting now. As the morning fog is lifting, Piotter points through a cut in the treeline toward the Back Forty site. "Up here there are knobs and swales and shaded areas. Each area has to be treated differently," notes Piotter; "that's what mountain winemaking is all about. We know the vineyards that want to be in these wines."

In addition, there's the astonishing and very competitively priced Ferrari-Carano Cabernet Sauvignon (\$35), and a complex five-varietal Bordeaux blend called Trésor (\$55). Don admits that Ferrari-Carano's

first Cab, made in 1986 from valley floor fruit, was not released, but that made him all the more determined to create great Cabernet. He finally realized that mountain fruit was the missing ingredient. "It's the soil, the drainage, the exposure, the altitude," says Don.

It's been a long road up the mountain, but as Don puts down his glass of "Back Forty" today he smiles. "Our red wines are finally where we want them to be."

Blanc Slate

Meanwhile, in Dry Creek Valley at the original winery, winemaker Sarah Quider is now in charge of crafting the white wines that first put Ferrari-Carano on the map in the 1980s. Sarah gives me a tour of the vast room where the Chardonnay is barrel-fermented. It's a complex array

of hundreds of different Chardonnay lots, in barrels with different toast levels from three different cooperages. "I always use French oak for the white wines," Sarah says, "because it doesn't have the weedy quality of American oak." A computerized barcode system keeps track of the inventory.

Three signature Chardonnays—a ripe, complex version from Alexander Valley (\$30); the white-fruit-bomb "Tre Terre" from Russian River Valley (\$36); and a toasty, full-textured Reserve (\$42) highlighting Carneros—are still Ferrari-Carano strong suits but have been joined more recently by several-vineyard designated Chards, including the elegant, vanilla-tinged "Dominique" (\$38). The lovely, quaffable Pinot Grigio (\$19) and rich, balanced Fumé Blanc (\$17) are now being bottled in screwcap,

Ferrari-Carano's superb Chardonnays are now matched by its red wines, including the two mountain-grown PreVail releases. (Photo courtesy Ferrari-Carano)



a controversial point with longtime Ferrari-Carano fans. "We get a letter a week about it," says Rhonda, but Don feels it's the only way to go with these whites. (THE TASTING PANEL's advice to doubters: "Get over it!")

As Hospitality Director Patrick Mukaida, explains, the Caranos, who were originally from Reno, Nevada (where Don was an attorney and where they still own a hotel), bought their first Sonoma property in 1979. "We found a second home here,"

says Rhonda. After selling fruit from the 30-acre farm to Gallo and Kenwood, among others, they finally decided to make wine under their own label. When their 1985 Chardonnay made the front page of *The Wine Spectator* on its release in 1987, Ferrari-Carano's fate was sealed.

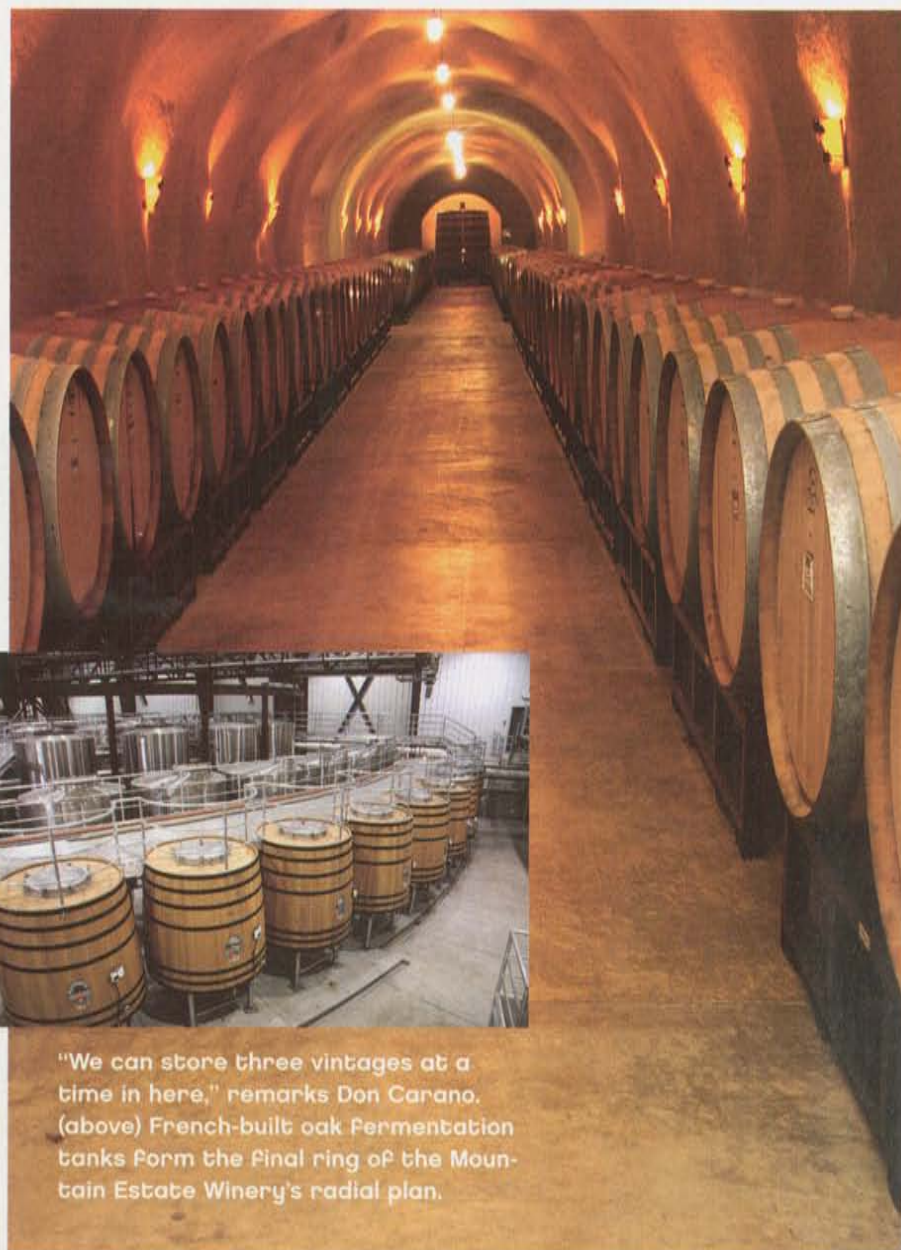
"We have enormous brand recognition," notes Don. The Ferrari in the winery's name is a tribute to Don's paternal grandmother, Emilia Ferrari, who came from the hill country above Genoa. Brand recognition



All in the Family: Winemaker Aaron Plotter and Vineyard Manager Steve Dominichelli outside the caves.

translates to loyalty in the marketplace as well as to a steady stream of visitors to the Ferrari-Carano visitor center, with its stunning new underground Enoteca Lounge and PreVail Room. The five acres of meticulously manicured gardens are tended by longtime Head Gardener Patrick Patin. ("Pat only reports to two people," jokes Don: "Rhonda and God.") In a nod to the brand's powerful equity, the PreVail wines, originally conceived as a separate label, will sport the Ferrari-Carano name in upcoming vintages. "You can't overlook the power of the brand."

It's Wednesday, the day when free lunch is provided to all Ferrari-Carano employees on the deck behind the Dry Creek Valley winery. People gather at the round tables under the warm Sonoma sunshine, munching on pizza, pasta and salad prepared by house chef Joe Costanzo. Although the staff is drinking lemonade for lunch, the air of family and friendship revolves around the love of wine. Looking out over the ripening grapes, Rhonda Carano puts it succinctly: "In the end it's all about property and people." ■■



"We can store three vintages at a time in here," remarks Don Carano. (above) French-built oak Fermentation tanks form the final ring of the Mountain Estate Winery's radial plan.