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Sommelier INDIA

THE WINE MAGAZINE

INDIAN WINE VIEWED

Through Bordelais eyes
page 26

M CHAPOUTIER

An enduring legacy
page 50

VALPOLICELLA

Italy's most loved region
page 40

PINOT NOIR HEAVEN

Napa Valley's Los Carneros

page 30

Napa Valley's Los Carneros Appellation

PINOT NOIR

HEAVEN

Mira Advani Honeycutt discovers heavenly Pinots in a slice of traditional Cabernet Sauvignon country

California's Napa Valley is renowned for its world-class Cabernet Sauvignon wines, rivalling those of Bordeaux in quality and price. Cab is King here. It's not known as just Cab, but rather Napa Cab!

Yet there's more to Napa than Cab. Napa Valley's Los Carneros sub-appellation is home to sublime Pinot Noir, a grape variety not generally associated with Napa. Two adjacent and famous wine valleys, Napa and Sonoma, converge in this one American Viticultural Area (AVA), which is home to some three dozen wineries, most of them residing on the Napa side.

Located at the southern and westernmost edge of Napa Valley, and stretching into Sonoma Valley, the cool region of Carneros (as locals call it) is influenced by sea air funneling in from San Pablo Bay and the Petaluma Gap to the West. Indeed, this is pure Pinot country and one of the early pioneers of this Burgundian variety in the Golden State.

The region's rich history dates back to the 1800s, long before it received its AVA status in 1983, owing to an influx of early settlers drawn to the climate and the fertile land. Later, in the 1930s, Carneros Winery (now Bouchaine Vineyards) became the first post-Prohibition winery, followed by the likes of Louis M Martini and André Tchelistcheff, the latter being instrumental in establishing the Carneros AVA. The last three decades have drawn European families from France (Domaine Carneros and HdV), Spain (Artesa) and Switzerland (Cuvaision) to the region.

Where there's Pinot (as it's popularly called) one also finds its white mate, Chardonnay. Both these Burgundian varieties thrive in the area's clay-dominated shallow soil. The Pinots express the purity of darker fruits, their floral brightness layered with a beguiling acidity. The Chardonnays too express a vibrant acidity, supported by bright pear-apple fruitiness.

While I was on the Pinot trail on my recent visit to Napa's side of Carneros, I also savoured some superb cool-climate Merlots, Syrahs and spectacular sparkling wines. Plus, I discovered a number of wineries blending both Napa and Sonoma Pinot grapes for some of their bottlings. Here's a report on my Pinot sojourn in Napa.

Hyde Vineyards

Pioneering vintner Larry Hyde is highly respected in Napa Valley, so much so that the highly coveted grapes from his 200-acre Hyde Vineyards are sourced by some 35 acclaimed producers in Napa and Sonoma. Why Carneros? I asked Larry who had worked at various Napa wineries before he planted his vineyard in 1979.

"The topsoil is shallow, I was looking for a cool climate and shallow soil," answered the Pinot-loving vintner.

I met with Larry, his Polish-born wife Beta, and their son Chris, the winery's general manager, at their stately European-style winery and hospitality centre. Here I learned fascinating stories of Larry's passion for vine-growing, such as his years of long historical research in preserving older heritage clones of Pinot Noir and Merlot with the help of UC Davis' Foundation Plant Service, and his collaboration with Aubert de Villaine, an in-law and the now retired proprietor of Burgundy's famed Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. The two men launched their HdV Wines in 2000, and their partnership continues today, producing 4,500 cases annually with fruit sourced from Hyde Vineyards.

Larry's love for Pinot led him to his brilliant concept of row orientation in the vineyards. Chris elaborated on the concept, "Back in the 1970s and '80s most folks were doing east-west planting but Dad wanted to do north-south to get sunlight exposure. Little by little he figured out the positions and changed it to north-east by south-west so we end up with more even ripening and better crop.

"They've done studies 20 years later and found out that Dad was right. By paying attention to the orientation of the vines he was able to create a more economic model and also produce better quality wine," Chris noted.

That quality of wines shone brilliantly in a tasting that was paired with delectable bites. The 2018 Pinot, layered with dark fruits and delicate yet firm tannins, glided on the palate when paired with duck rilette on crostini, and the 2018 Chardonnay showed its richness of stone fruit flavours alongside a goat cheese tartlet. The portfolio of wines that we tasted, including Merlot and Syrah, expressed the purity of Carneros' cool-climate terroir, resulting in wines that are seamlessly balanced with acidity and vibrant fruit.

An aerial view of Hyde Vineyard Estate Winery



Cuvaison – Two Estates Wine Collective

“Pinots are expressive of our terroir,” said Dan Zepponi, President and CEO of Two Estates Wine Collective, Cuvaison’s parent company.

Cuvaison is among a rare group of nine Napa Valley wineries established in the 1960s that have operated in the valley ever since. Founded in 1969 by Thomas Parkhill, it was acquired in 1979 by the current owners, the Swiss-based Schmidheiny family which has been in the wine business for four generations. The worldwide spotlight on Napa Valley created by the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting sparked matriarch Adda Schmidheiny’s interest in the region.

“She came to Napa and was captivated by it,” said Zepponi. Adda took a handful of dirt in her kerchief back to Switzerland and convinced her family that Napa wines should be part of their portfolio.

Breezes from San Pablo Bay cool the scenic terrace as we take in Cuvaison’s spectacular 400-acre estate, surrounded by undulating hillsides. The 150-acre vineyard planting is sculpted into a mosaic of 20 blocks of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and Syrah.

“What we do is specialise in Pinot – it has its vineyard expression – and we do it by blocks or clones,” Zepponi said of the wines crafted by



Dan Zepponi, president and CEO of Two Estates Wine Collective

Cuvaison is among a rare group of nine Napa Valley wineries established in the 1960s that have operated in the valley ever since. Founded in 1969 by Thomas Parkhill



Cuvaison’s three flagship Pinots - expressive of its hillside terroir

Napa veteran winemaker, Steve Rogstad.

I tasted the three flagship Pinots. The deeply concentrated 2019 Adda, named after the family matriarch, the 2021 vibrant 90.1, named after a Burgundian clone, and the 2021 Spire, named for the hilltop block. “This is the pinnacle of what we make, the blend of the site that shows a potpourri of the site,” Zepponi commented.

Domaine Carneros – Taittinger & Kobrand

Upon entering the Carneros region on Carneros Highway, an 18th-century chateau-style winery, inspired by Epernay’s Château de la Marquetterie, comes into view. Domaine Carneros, a partnership between Champagne’s famed Taittinger House and Kobrand Corporation, was established when Claude Taittinger acquired the 138-acre estate in 1987 to produce *méthode traditionnelle* sparkling wines. The Pinot Noir portfolio was added in 1992. Founding winemaker and CEO of Domaine Carneros, Eileen Crane (now retired) is not only a Napa legend but the mind behind creating timeless wines and the landmark estate.

On my visit I was greeted by Remi Cohen, the current CEO. It’s a Friday afternoon, the estate was jammed with visitors, enjoying flights of sparkling wines and Pinots paired

with a selection of caviar and smoked salmon in the French-accented atrium. We tasted a Pinot sampler, crafted by winemaker TJ Evans, of three 2020 vintages: an intensely aromatic Avant Garde, a textural Estate and an aromatic Le Ciel Serein. The Famous Gate 2019, the estate’s flagship, displayed the purest expression of Carneros, aromatic with red fruits.

Artesa – Dramatic hilltop winery

This dramatic hilltop winery is an architectural masterpiece, integrating Spanish and California influences. Raventós Codorniu, Spain’s oldest winemaking family, established the Codorniu winery in 1991 to make sparkling wine. Later renamed Artesa, it now produces both still and sparkling wine.

Of the 150-acre vineyard some 80 acres

Domaine Carneros, a partnership between Champagne’s Taittinger House and Kobrand Corporation, was established in 1987



Above: Domaine Carneros wine including The Famous Gate, the estate’s flagship wine. Below: Entrance to the 18th-century chateau-style winery



are planted to Pinot with 10 distinct clones, assistant winemaker Kyle Altomare told me as we strolled around the spectacular grounds.

Kyle shared his thoughts on the tribulations of Pinot production. “You have to love Pinot. It’s the cruellest variety I’ve ever worked with. You cannot take anything for granted. You really have to pay attention and that’s what makes it so elegant, so beautiful.”

The tasting lineup of 2019s showed the



Above: A flight of Domaine Carneros Pinot Noir paired with caviar and smoked salmon
Below: An aerial view of the 150-acre Artesa vineyard at sunrise

“You have to love Pinot. It’s the cruellest variety I’ve ever worked with. You cannot take anything for granted. You have to pay attention and that’s what makes it so elegant, so beautiful” — Kyle Altomare

diversity, yet the singular purity, of Pinot from this hillside. From entry-level Los Carneros and Estate Vineyard to the velvety-textured Block 12 Pinot.

Bouchaine Vineyards

On a cool morning, warmed by the fire on the terrace, we were sitting on a property once owned by the famed Beringer family in the 1960s. After 20 years as a storage facility, the winery fell into disrepair till Gerret and Tatiana Copeland acquired it, restoring it to a modern winery and visitors centre.

Of the 87 planted acres, 46 are dedicated to Pinot, of which we had a four-flight tasting crafted by winemaker Chris Kajani. The range of clonal selection – from Pommard and Calera to Dijon – showed the spectrum of Bouchaine’s Pinot portfolio. We also savoured a varietal Pinot Meunier, a popular blending variety in sparkling wine, but rarely seen as a varietal wine in Napa.



Garden of Bouchaine Vineyards – formerly Carneros Winery.
Below: Nicholson Ranch Pinot Noir wine with a classic Carneros profile



Nicholson Ranch – Deepak Gulrajani

I would be remiss if I didn’t include Deepak Gulrajani’s brilliant Nicholson Ranch Pinots made in his non-intervention style, fermented with indigenous yeast, unfinned and unfiltered, expressing a classic Carneros profile. But this is where the appellation demarcation line comes in. “I knew I was on the Sonoma side, but for the first few years I thought I was in the Carneros appellation,” he told me, speaking about the 40-acre hillside ranch he acquired in 1995. “We are surrounded on three sides by Carneros; in terms of soil and terroir it is pretty much Carneros.”

His winery was also a member of the Carneros Wine Alliance until he got an apologetic call years later from one of the Alliance’s founding members who told him his ranch falls not in Carneros but in the Sonoma Coast AVA which meets at the edge of Carneros.

“My vineyard is at the crossroads of Carneros and Sonoma Coast AVAs but the wind doesn’t know appellations,” Gulrajani mused. Certainly, his beautiful and structured wines taste like the best of Carneros Pinot Noirs. ♦