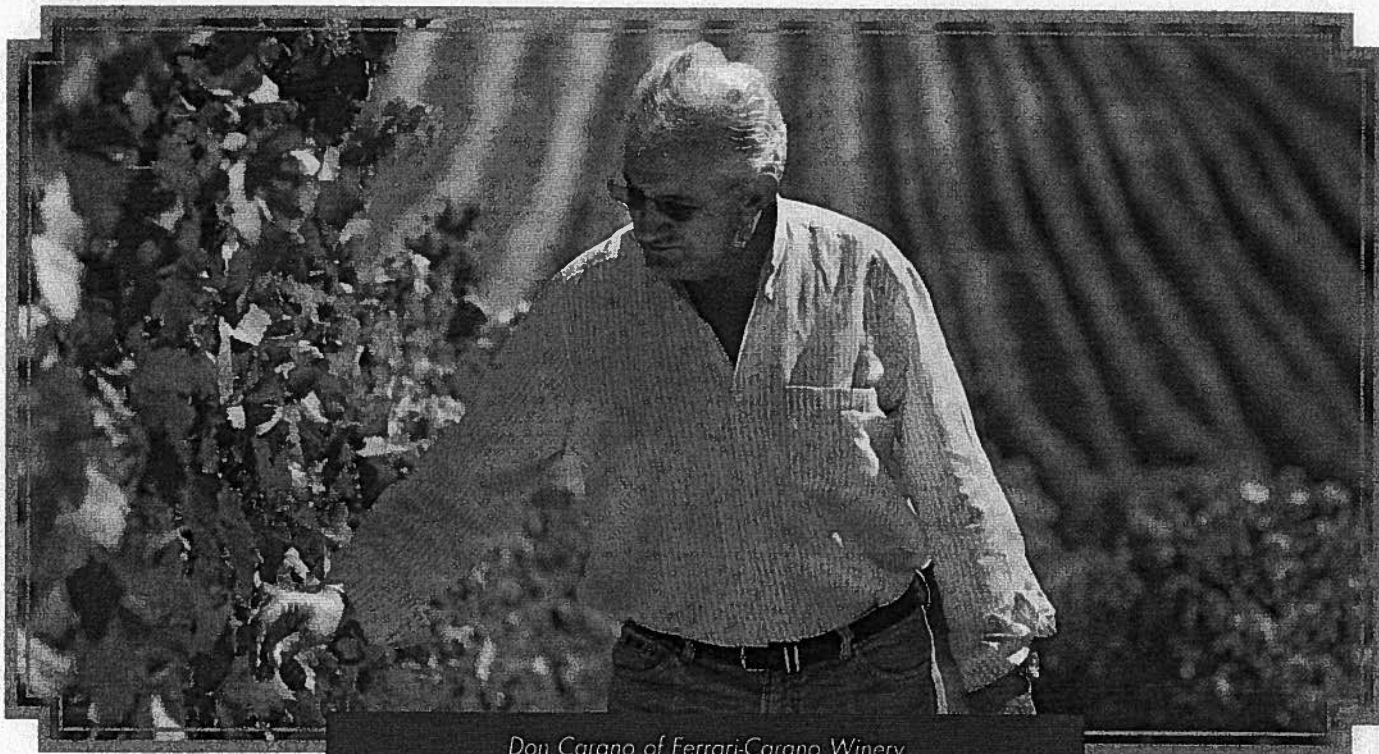


Out of This World



Don Carano of Ferrari-Carano Winery

Ferrari-Carano's mountain Reds inhabit their own universe.

QRW STAFF

Our annual Best of The Best California blind tastings are always learning experiences, often humbling experiences. They're also appreciative ones, especially when we discover new wineries, recall older ones, and realize more completely each year just how great red California wines can be, prompting the question: Who needs Bordeaux? Napa and Sonoma's splendor shouldn't surprise us anymore, but they do, and we're glad because it saves us from being jaded, unquestionably the greatest of wine sins. It's at these tastings where we discovered HALL and Ty Caton. It's where reborn William Hill wines made us glad. It's where we appreciate the wineries that repeat their greatness, blind tasting after blind tasting, like Caymus, Donum, Merry Edwards, Ridge, and Shafer.

Of repeated greatness, we must turn to Ferrari-Carano because no Sonoma winery has achieved the consistent success of this winery. For examples, over the last five years Ferrari-Carano's red wines have made the "Best of The Best" list five times; they have made "Best of Show" — our highest designation — twice; and they have also made "Best Value" three times. This kind of accomplishment has not been among the hoi polloi of the industry: it has come from the highest and heaviest of competition. Their success has been duplicated only by the likes of Caymus and Shafer, both Napa Valley wineries.

Ferrari-Carano in Dry Creek Valley was started by Don and Rhonda Carano in 1981. From the first vintage in 1985, the winery was known as a serious place, where fine Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc were made. It's a credit to the winery that brilliant whites are still made there: Chardonnay may be mundane and Sauvignon Blanc may be common, but never at Ferrari-Carano — credit winemaker Sarah Quider. A few years later, their Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Tresor (their earliest red Bordeaux blend) gained national recognition. In due course, the Caranos created a second spectacular winery for their Mountain Reds in Alexander Valley's RockRise Mountain. These reds have taken Ferrari-Carano into a further dimension, into an orbiting oenological universe where most red blends can't tread. Credit winemaker Aaron Piotter for this. One of his red blends — 2006 PreVail West Face — is composed of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah, both of which thrive in the RockRise Mountain area. It's difficult to describe PreVail without sounding banal: suffice it to say, the wine is dramatic. The texture is firm and silky; the flavors are syrupy, filled with blackberry and rich mocha; the finish — the ultimate test of any great wine — is complex, opulent, resounding, and powerful. If you're building a serious wine cellar PreVail has to be part of it.

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Other Ferrari-Carano Mountain Reds are part of the same universe. Another winner at the 2011 Best of The Best was the 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon (Alexander Valley). It continues to be a standout value (\$28), and to stand out on restaurant wine lists, despite the fact that there are dozens of fine California Cabs eager to displace it. It is not for nothing that sommeliers and wine directors continue to place it on their lists. The blend is chiefly Cabernet Sauvignon, but there is enough Syrah

(17 percent) and some Petit Verdot to give the wine greater backbone, engaging character and flavor. Blackberry, cherry, boysenberry, and oak commingle with spice, mocha, vanilla, and mineral tones, offering a delicious variety of tastes in the finish. It's difficult to find a wine of this quality for the price.

Our praise concludes with Tresor ("treasury" in Italian), Ferrari-Carano's more traditional and classic Bordeaux-style blend of five varietals, with

Cabernet being chief. Conjoin blackberry, anise, and some blueberry, with rich mocha, spice, and vanillin and you imagine the idea of Tresor. Taste it and you'll realize it. We're glad to single out Ferrari-Carano mountain reds because excellence shouldn't be taken for granted. The winery, like all excellent wineries in California, never had to reinvent itself. It is what it is — a great non-corporate, family winery — and no one is complaining. ♪