

CARINA CELLARS

by Dave Wilcox

In the years since owner David Hardee established Carina Cellars in 2002, the winery carved out a reputation for producing premium Rhône-style wines using fruit sourced from exceptional vineyards throughout the Central Coast.

Now, Carina is entering a new phase as it harvests the first grapes from its Rancho del Cielo vineyard west of Paso Robles.

“We’re all looking forward to our first harvest,” said winemaker Ryan Saccomano, who joined Carina Cellars last December to help spearhead the winery’s Paso Robles efforts. He is teamed with Joey Tensley, who has been the winemaker at Carina since its launch.

Tensley, whose own label focuses on Syrah, is one of the reasons Carina Cellars excels at producing some of California’s top Rhône-style wines. Saccomano will continue the Carina philosophy of using the best fruit available and allowing the vineyard’s quality to show through in the bottle.

The initial harvest of the steep, 23-acre Rancho del Cielo vineyard won’t be large, but will give Carina Cellars’ fans a taste of what to expect in the future. The vineyard, which climbs from 1,475 feet to almost 2,000 feet and is one of the highest along coastal California, was planted in 2007 to a number of Rhône varietals. Among those are Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and Viognier.

“This area enjoys unique soils and climate, and has a larger diurnal swing than any other appellation in California,” said Carolyn Turner, Carina’s national sales manager. That, in turn, results in a wide range of microclimates.

What that means for winemakers, she explained, “is a broad palette of wine components from which to blend deep complexity. The calcareous and chalky, rock soils are also unusual for California and are reminiscent of the esteemed Chateaufeuf du Pape area of France.”

Such challenging growing conditions stresses the vines and results

in small clusters of fruit with concentrated, intense flavors.

“The Rhône grapes grow so perfectly in this region,” said Turner.

Hardee, Carina Cellars’ owner, first cast an eye north to the Paso Robles region in 2005 when the Los Olivos-based winery first sourced fruit from the area. Impressed with the results, Hardee and Tensley began searching for the ideal property to grow Rhône varietals. It took two years before finding the 83-acre Rancho del Cielo (the “ranch in the sky.”)

Carina also built a new winery and tasting room in Paso Robles. Construction was completed a year ago and last December Carina moved its inventory and equipment there from the facility in Buellton.

A tasting room remains open in Los Olivos and Carina continues to obtain stellar grapes from vineyards in the Santa Ynez Valley – such as Stolpman and Colson Canyon – along with Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley’s Robert Craig and Farmhouse vineyards.

The Cabernet is blended with Syrah from the Santa Ynez Valley to produce Carina’s flagship wine, Iconoclast.

Working with estate-grown fruit, though, will expand Carina Cellars’ offerings and allows Hardee and his winemakers to closely monitor the vineyard throughout the growing season.

“We’ll have a little bit more control over how the grapes have been grown,” said Saccomano.

Saccomano isn’t new to Carina Cellars. His first job in the wine industry after studying at the California Culinary Academy and realizing he was most interested in wine came at Carina Cellars. He left the Central Coast for Napa Valley and Sonoma, but was excited to return when Hardee and Tensley asked him to fill the opening for a winemaker in Paso Robles.

“The climate in Paso is quite a bit different than what we’re used to in Santa Barbara County,” he said of having the chance to make the first batch of wine from Rancho del Cielo. “It will be a little bit challenging, but exciting.”

Continued

Saccomano also notes that the blends for which Carina Cellars has become widely praised will continue to be produced.

Clairvoyant is a blend of which more than half is Syrah, with about a third Grenache and the balance being Mourvedre. Sibylline combines the same three varietals, but in different proportions, with Mourvedre the primary grape.

There's also the popular 7 Percent, a Syrah that includes seven percent Viognier.

You can get a first-hand taste of these wines when Carina Cellars celebrates the Paso Robles Harvest Festival on the weekend of October 16-18 with some special events at the winery.

Saccomano will host blind tastings and offer his insights into the winemaking process throughout the weekend, while Hardee will guide tours of the Rancho del Cielo vineyard.

A Winemaker's Dinner on October 17th is already sold out, but a "Nite Time Wine Down" on Saturday evening, October 18th will offer visitors a chance to relax on the patio overlooking Paso's west side while sipping Carina's wines and enjoying tapas ordered from De La Saison Catering. The event is scheduled from 5 to 8 p.m.

The Rancho del Cielo tasting room is open weekends from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., or by appointment during the week. It's located at 3525 Adelaida Road west of Paso Robles. For appointments or directions, call (415) 309-2046. The Los Olivos tasting room is open daily from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and is located at 2900 Grand Avenue (next to Paninos.) For more information or directions, call (805) 688-2459.



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