



Winemaker Profile: Carina Cellars

JOEY TENSLEY

by Dave Wilcox

Harvest is always an exciting time for a winemaker, but this year promises to be even more special for Carina Cellars' Joey Tensley.

This will be the first crop harvested from the winery's 83-acre Rancho del Cielo vineyard – of which 22 acres are planted – on Paso Robles' west side.

"I'm really looking forward to our first crop," said Tensley.

Up to now, Carina Cellars has sourced all of its fruit from some of the top vineyards in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties.

For Tensley, whose name is virtually synonymous with Syrah in the world of winemaking, the Carina Cellars vineyard offers him the opportunity to showcase the unique characteristics of the chalky, steep hilltop location in Paso Robles' Adelaida region.

Rancho del Cielo, or Ranch of the Sky, reaches 1,925 feet at its highest elevation – among the highest vineyards on the California coast. Varietals planted there are Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and Viognier – the calling cards of the Carina Cellars label.

At 38, Tensley has already worked in the wine industry for about 20 years, starting as a cellar rat while still a teenager and eventually

establishing himself as one of the Central Coast's top young winemakers.

Tensley was first bitten by the wine bug when he traveled to France as a 12-year-old to play in a youth soccer tournament. His dreams of becoming a winemaker were reinforced as a teenager working in a deli and wine shop in Bakersfield.

"That's when I really got into it," he said.

Moving to Santa Barbara for school, said Tensley, opened the opportunity to work in the wine industry. He quickly worked his way up, landing a job as assistant winemaker at Babcock Vineyards in 1996. It was there that he truly learned the importance of individual vineyards and that great wines are made with great grapes.

Tensley launched his own label in 1998, focusing almost exclusively on vineyard-designated Syrahs.

He was somewhat of a pioneer, with very few wineries producing Syrah at the time.

"I think in this area Syrah is a great fit," he said. "There are so many micro-climates, different soil types. With Syrah, it's all about the resources."

Tensley carried his minimalist philosophy to Carina Cellars in 2001, when he joined with owner David Hardee to launch the Los Olivos-based winery.

At Carina, Tensley makes Viognier, Mourvedre, Petite Sirah, along with Rhône-style blends called Clairvoyant and Sibylline. That's in addition to multiple Syrahs released each vintage from vineyards in Ballard Canyon, Colson Canyon and the Santa Ynez Valley.

Tensley also created a Syrah that includes seven percent Viognier – dubbed, logically, 7 Percent – that has become a Carina Cellars favorite.

"Viognier really adds a lot of nose to the wine," he said, "while the Syrah gives it weight."

None of Tensley's wines see much time in new oak, which he said tends to mask the vineyard characteristics. And, while many winemakers talk of letting the vineyard express itself, Tensley truly takes a hands-off approach.

"It's all about the vineyard."

For Tensley and Carina Cellars this year, that remark takes on special significance.

Visit the Carina Cellars tasting room in Los Olivos from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily at 2900 Grand Ave., Suite A. If you're in Paso Robles on the weekend, stop by the new tasting room, Friday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., at 3525 Adelaida Road west of Paso Robles. Visit www.carinacellars.com details.