

THE ROAD

Less Traveled

DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN BEAUTY OF LAZY CREEK VINEYARDS

by Diane Denham / photos by Vera Photographics

Lazy Creek Winery is a charming enclave nestled amongst vine-covered rolling hills in Anderson Valley.

The rusty, but picturesque, pick-up truck ready to deliver its load of old barrels.

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AT THE "DEEP END"

of Mendocino County's Anderson Valley—the part closest to the Pacific Coast—there's a little-known 95-acre vineyard and winery hidden away in the hills. Getting there is a bit like making a fairy tale journey through an enchanted forest, but the destination is truly magical: People have been falling in love with this special place for more than a century.

From San Francisco, the easiest route to Lazy Creek is via Highway 101 North to Cloverdale. Take the exit for Highway 128 and wind your way westward through 40 miles of redwood forest until you come to the miniscule town of Philo. Just past Philo, turn onto the two-lane dirt road at the Lazy Creek Vineyards sign. Your eyes will need to adjust in the shady, sun-dappled forest light, and your tires will rattle as you cross the bridges (there are three) over the Lazy Creek. You'll go far enough to wonder if you've made a mistake, then suddenly, the dim forest gives way to a sunlit enclave nestled amongst rolling, vine-covered hills. There's the tasting room, decked out with red umbrellas and surrounded by landscaping full of native plants in shades of blues, purples, pinks and yellows. In front, the rusted but picturesque pick-up truck sits ready to deliver its load of old wine barrels. Beyond, the weathered buildings speak to the property's 100-year history and, in the reed-fringed pond nearby, turtles line up on a log to bask. They pay no heed to the winery cat sauntering by nonchalantly.

Lazy Creek is home to the second-oldest vineyard in Anderson Valley, although it's located almost at the western limits of vine viability. The Italian Pisoni family lived there from the early 1900s until they sold in 1969 to a Swiss couple, Hans and Theresia Kobler. The sale

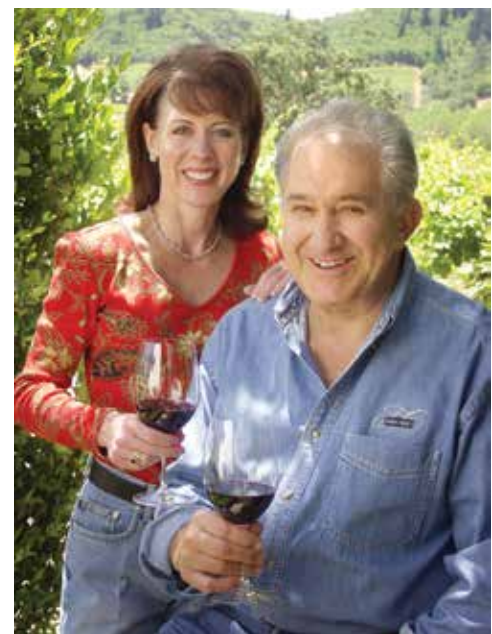


PHOTO COURTESY OF LAZY CREEK VINEYARDS

Rhonda and Don Carano, owners of Lazy Creek Vineyards and Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery.



This wooden fermentation “egg” is one of the cutting-edge winemaking tools Winemaker Christy Ackerman uses to craft elegantly complex Pinot Noir wines. Lazy Creek was one of the first American wineries to purchase the French innovation.



began the era when current winemaker, Christy Ackerman, first discovered Lazy Creek—one of the first wineries she visited in her life. “It was the kind of place nobody knew about,” she says. “I loved this place, but you had to know someone who could tell you where it was because there was no sign out on the road.”

After 26 years, the Koblers sold Lazy Creek to another couple, Josh and Mary Beth Chandler. The Chandlers were on their way to purchase a different property when they accidentally turned down the dirt road in 1998. Smitten, they stopped in their tracks and bought Lazy Creek instead. Don and Rhonda Carano, owners of Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery, experienced a similar love-at-first-sight sensation. They purchased Lazy Creek in the summer of 2008, and it still evokes emotion. “I think Lazy Creek Vineyard embraces what I love about making wine ... the land with its beauty and resourcefulness, the relationships and comraderie shared with the community, a way of living that is easy, simple, not hectic, not commercial, but slow, easy and inviting,” Rhonda says. “LCV wraps you in her arms with love, from which you create a product that is part of you, your expression of the land, your lifestyle that can be enjoyed and shared with family and friends. What can I say, except it’s special!”

But it was clear Lazy Creek needed some TLC in both the production facilities and the vineyards. “A lot of the vineyards were old and diseased,” Ackerman says. The Caranos invested significantly in up-

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Cellarmaster Serafin Aceituna is a man of many talents. In addition to keeping the wood-fired oven stoked to a perfect temperature, he’s the green thumb behind the exquisite landscaping.

grading the vineyards, which are now fully California Certified Sustainable. Christy made do with the original winery the first couple of years, but when two new ranches were purchased to augment the 47 planted acres at Lazy Creek's estate, the old winery had to be retired. It's still there, however, emitting weather-beaten charm beside the new state-of-the-art winery and wine caves, also fully California Certified Sustainable.

The investments have paid off handsomely in the finished wines from Lazy Creek. On a sweltering summer day, we tasted them alongside homemade pizzas baked in the winery's outdoor pizza oven—courtesy of Ackerman and Cellarmaster Serafin Aceituna. A salmon-hued 2016 Rosé of Pinot Noir accessorized the smoked salmon and mozzarella pie as elegantly as Tiffany & Co. did Audrey Hepburn. Its refreshing strawberry and peach attributes took the sizzle out of the afternoon.

Though rosé is an increasingly important part of Lazy Creek's sales, and a small amount of Gewürztraminer honors the winery's heritage, Pinot Noir is the forte. "I really like the expressiveness of Pinot Noir," Ackerman said during the tasting. The differences of expression are clearly evident. Comparing the two estate wines sourced from the mountain ranches, the 2014 LCV Middleridge Ranch leans more toward red fruit and graphite, with a touch of floral, whereas the 2014 FC Sky High Ranch shows more cola, spice and even a bit of conifer leaf. The weightier mouthfeel with açai, spice and wild berry characteristics in the 2014 Estate Pinot from the Lazy Creek property made it an especially scrumptious match for the rich flavors in the mushroom and asparagus pizza.

During a tour of the grounds, Ackerman showed us some of the mementos left by the previous Lazy Creek owners: pawprints and handprints in the cement, the outbuilding lovingly built to reflect the sense of awe the property inspires. We could feel these people had ached for this unforgettable place to remember them too. ■**cr**



**Lazy Creek Vineyards
Winemaker Christy
Ackerman.**



Salmon-hued Rosé of Pinot Noir and smoked salmon pizza—perfect accessories for a sizzling summer day!



The Lazy Creek Middleridge Ranch Pinot Noir and asparagus and mushroom pizza from the winery's oven prove an ideal pairing.

