

Mendocino County's Lazy Creek Vineyards readies for its close-up

By Mike Dunne

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An uncommonly long, straight stretch of Highway 128 just northwest of Philo in the middle of Mendocino County's Anderson Valley tempts motorists to floor the accelerator.

That would be a mistake, especially for wine enthusiasts. If they speed up, chances are they will blow right by a secluded lane off the east shoulder of the highway about midway through the straightaway.

This is the entrance to one of Anderson Valley's more historic and quaint wineries, small and underappreciated Lazy Creek Vineyards.

Well, it isn't so small nowadays, not since Don and Rhonda Carano of Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery in neighboring Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley bought the property in 2008 and launched a restyling and expansion that only now is being completed. Still to be determined, for one, is the final resting place for a rusting and sagging landmark 1935 Chevrolet flatbed truck that's been moved about the estate for decades.

The Caranos have been busy building a new winery and tasting room, digging caves under vines sweeping up the hill behind the visitor center, and tidying up the grounds, all while retaining the rustic essence of the place instead of imposing on the grounds the kind of grand garden that distinguishes Ferrari-Carano.

What's more, they are recommitting the site to the varietal wines that have best represented the setting since the late Hans Kobler and his wife, Theresia, bought it in 1969: pinot noir and gewürztraminer.

Still, word has yet to get around to what's going on at Lazy Creek Vineyards. For 90 minutes on a late-summer Saturday I was the only person to venture up the dark and narrow lane along aptly named Lazy Creek to pull up one of the cork-topped stools in the winery's tasting room.

Hans Kobler might not recognize the place. When I first stopped by Lazy Creek Vineyard in 1998, the site consisted largely of a scattering of weathered outbuildings. A picnic table pretty much constituted his tasting room.

The reason for my visit at that time was to learn more about Lazy Creek's 1997 Anderson Valley Estate Gewürztraminer, which the day before had been voted the best white wine at the Mendocino County Fair commercial wine competition.

I'm still crazy about Lazy Creek's gewürztraminer. The latest version, the 2012, is just as intense with the varietal's telltale floral, lychee, peach and spicy characteristics as the 1997. It's lush and just a touch sweet, but finishes with refreshing snap thanks to its cleansing acidity. In a departure from Kobler's handling of the grape, today's Lazy Creek winemaker, Christy Ackerman, doesn't age the wine in oak puncheons; it's fermented and stored solely in stainless-steel tanks. Aside from that, the only other significant difference is price: The 1997 sold for \$10, the 2012 for \$22.

Of Lazy Creek's 50 acres of wine grapes, just three are planted to gewürztraminer. The rest is pinot noir. Unlike a block of syrah that was grafted to pinot noir not long ago, there's no chance that the Caranos also will graft over the gewürztraminer, despite the challenges of selling it in today's American wine market, Ackerman says. "We'll keep it. It accounts for a lot of the history of Lazy Creek and of Anderson Valley."

The Lazy Creek site is believed to have been cultivated first in the early 1900s by a family of Italian immigrants who established a plum orchard and a vineyard, the Pinolis. The Koblers, Swiss immigrants, in 1969 bought the property from heirs of the founding Pinolis. Hans Kobler had come to wine via stints as headwaiter and banquet manager at the venerable Jack's restaurant in San Francisco. In 1972, the Koblers left San Francisco and settled on the ranch, where they established their Lazy Creek winery in a former barn the next year. It was just the second winery to be established in Anderson Valley, not far from the first, Husch Vineyards.

In 1998, the Koblers sold their 93 acres to Josh and Mary Beth Chandler, who operated the winery for a decade before selling the property to the Caranos.

While the gewürztraminer has historic and sentimental value for Lazy Creek, the Caranos and Ackerman clearly expect their flagship wines to be pinot noir, for which Anderson Valley is rising in esteem.

Lately, four pinot noirs have been poured in the Lazy Creek tasting room, two of them under the Ferrari-Carano brand.

The lightest and friskiest wine in that lineup is the pretty, spicy and strawberry-accented Lazy Creek 2013 Anderson Valley Rosé of Pinot Noir (\$22).

The Lazy Creek 2012 Anderson Valley Estate Pinot Noir (\$50) is a solidly structured and finely focused interpretation of the varietal, with more earthiness and dark cherry fruit flavor than customarily seen in pinot noirs of the appellation.

A lighter, leaner and more elegant take on the varietal is the Ferrari-Carano 2012 Anderson Valley Middleridge Ranch Pinot Noir (\$47). Here, the fruit is fresh, forward and uncomplicated, the structure and tannins reserved but nonetheless sturdy, and the oak carefully modulated. The grapes for the wine come from another estate owned by the Caranos, with the 2013 version of the wine to move from the Ferrari-Carano brand to the Lazy Creek.

An even lighter rendition of the varietal, but with subtle complexity and a surprisingly long finish, is the Ferrari-Carano 2012 Mendocino Ridge Sky High Ranch Pinot Noir (\$48). The

grapes were grown on a third Carano parcel in Mendocino County, this one 1,600 feet up the coastal range, about 10 miles from the Pacific.

To Ackerman, the common thread that ties the pinot noirs together, despite their diverse vineyards, is that they are more structured, more acidic and more food-friendly than huskier pinot noirs coming from Sonoma County's Russian River Valley. "My goal in the wines is to make the finish the most important thing. The aroma makes you drink the first glass of a wine, but the finish brings you back," Ackerman says.

Despite the growing success of pinot noir in Anderson Valley, the Caranos someday may rue their decision to graft over the estate's syrah. The last vintage of that wine, the Lazy Creek 2010 Anderson Valley Syrah (\$28), is a delightfully jammy, bacony, smoky and spicy wine, its fresh blueberry fruit underscored with meatiness and forest duff, making for one substantial yet balanced syrah. Grab it while it lasts.

As to gewürztraminer, Ackerman is as perplexed by the varietal's lack of popular standing as any other California winemaker who works with it. She makes just 100 cases a vintage, and has little trouble selling that, given its acceptance in the wine press and among the few wine enthusiasts who frequent the Lazy Creek tasting room. "Certain varietals come and go in popularity," she says. "I don't know what it will take to make it more popular, but we have a lot of repeat customers who know and like our dry gewürztraminer, and I hope they continue to get the word out."

Newcomers to the winery first have to find the place, the entrance to which is just northwest of landmark Navarro Vineyards & Winery. A word of caution, however: If you approach the driveway from the northwest, make sure no one is about to pass you on that rare long and straight stretch of Highway 128.

Wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne's selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. He can be reached at mikedunne@winegigs.com.

Lazy Creek Vineyards

The tasting room at 4741 Highway 128, Philo, is open 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Thursday through Monday. For more information, call (707) 895-3623 or visit the website www.lazycreekvineyards.com

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