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## Can a Once-Hip Wine Region Be Cool Again?

California's Carneros region may have been overshadowed by other appellations, but a small group of vineyard owners and vintners are looking to restore youth and excitement



ILLUSTRATION: GRAHAM ROUMIEU

By **LETTIE TEAGUE**

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One time, not so long ago, the most famous and sought-after place to grow Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in California was Carneros. The region, which lies partly in Napa and partly in Sonoma, showed so much promise that big-name sparkling-wine producers from France and Spain opened Carneros outposts. Today, the former hot spot has been overshadowed by newer, cooler appellations.

“Cooler” in terms of both climate and fashion, places like the Sonoma Coast and Anderson Valley are now attracting the talent and earning the big critical scores as winemakers looking for a challenge, and perhaps a place to make a name for themselves, turn to uncharted territory farther north. And Carneros, the well-trodden ground of more-established, often less-exciting brands, is considered “middle-aged,” said

winemaker Scott Rich, who makes his Talisman Pinot Noirs from several regions, including Carneros.

Lee Hudson, the owner of Hudson Vineyards, who has been farming in Carneros for more than 30 years, remembers the early excitement about the region, when it was pretty much the only Pinot Noir region in the U.S. anyone talked about. “There was a lot of buzz,” he recalled.

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county)—was created in 1983. Four years later, Claude Taittinger, of the Champagne Taittinger family, chose the area for his new venture, Domaine Carneros. The estate is still the most visible winery in Carneros, rising high above the fields off Highway 121 like some sort of Gallic mirage. Other sparkling-wine giants, including Spain's Freixenet and Codorníu, set up shop around the same time. Freixenet founded Gloria Ferrer, while Codorníu created Codorníu Napa, now known as Artesa Napa Valley.

One of the buzziest wineries, however, was a local one: Saintsbury Winery. Principals Richard Ward and David Graves put Carneros on the map in the early 1990s with single-vineyard Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays that won much acclaim.

But the winemaking landscape in Carneros has changed since those early years, Mr. Ward said when we met over a glass of wine a couple of months ago. While Saintsbury is still located in the area, the company has gone elsewhere to look for grapes to add to its portfolio of mostly Carneros Pinot Noirs, notably the Sonoma Coast.

“Carneros has suffered from the fact that a large number of companies make wine there, but quality isn’t their only goal,” he said. Looking to maximize profit, big corporations have settled in Carneros, where making bigger quantities of wine is undeniably easier than in the more remote vineyards of the far Sonoma Coast.

Originally dedicated to cattle and dairy farms, the region’s gently rolling hills are dominated by big vineyards like Silverado Premium Properties’ Stanly Ranch. The Napa-based investment and management firm’s 280-acre estate is the source of many wines, including more-commercial offerings from large-scale producers like Beringer Vineyards. These are the names that come to mind first for most wine professionals when they think of Carneros, according to Gary Lipp of Coho Wines in Napa.

Mr. Lipp is part of a small group of vineyard owners and vintners who still believe in Carneros. With many new small producers still eschewing the area in favor of the Sonoma Coast and Anderson Valley, these men and women are looking to return youth and excitement to the region via smaller corners of big vineyards or lesser-known grapes.

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From his plot at Stanly Ranch, Mr. Lipp makes several hundred cases each year of his Coho Pinot Noir, a subtle and elegant wine that’s well-priced at \$45 a bottle. Price was a factor in Mr. Lipp’s decision to create wine from vines at Stanly Ranch. Although he is a fan of Pinot Noir made in regions such as the Russian River Valley—and once made wine there—“it got too expensive,” he said, estimating it cost around 35% more to buy fruit of the same caliber there as in Carneros.

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Francis Mahoney, a vineyard owner who also makes wine under his own name, is known for his Pinot Noir-dominated Las Brisas Vineyard. But he has also become interested in grapes like Vermentino and planted some in a section of Las Brisas that is close to San Pablo Bay.

Ryan and Megan Glaab, the husband-and-wife team behind Ryme Cellars in Healdsburg, liked his Las Brisas Vermentino so much they were able to convince Mr. Mahoney to sell them some fruit. The resulting “His” and “Hers” bottlings have garnered an

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—Richard Ward

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impassioned following. (“His” is a skin-contact wine; “Hers” is a more traditional stainless-steel version.) In turn, their wines have inspired other vintners to ask about the availability of Las Brisas Vermentino, Ms. Glaab said. “Once you get any sort of notice with the wine, it’s a matter of keeping the fruit.”

Stalwart Carneros estates like Mr. Hudson’s eponymous vineyards and Larry Hyde’s Hyde Family Winery, whose fruit is as pricey and sought-after as that from the Russian River Valley, are also looking to attract more interest in the region from wine tourists. Both wineries have long track records of producing great fruit, but they tend to be better known to winemakers than tourists since they don’t operate tasting rooms. That will change soon; Messrs. Hyde and Hudson both plan to open tasting rooms within the next two years.

Along with a new luxury resort at Stanly Ranch, scheduled to be built next year, the tasting rooms could help raise the region’s profile, which is much lower than that of Napa or Sonoma, and make it more of a destination—particularly if Messrs. Hyde and Hudson include some of the wines made by the famous vintners who buy their fruit.

Mr. Hudson has sold high-quality grapes to well-known wine estates for decades. His roster includes superstars Ehren Jordan, Mark Aubert and Donald Patz, all of whom also make wines from other places in California. Some started in Carneros before branching out. Mr. Patz, of Patz & Hall, is a classic example, noted Mr. Hudson. “He started in Carneros, and it didn’t take him long to go somewhere else.”

Despite the region’s midlife crisis, Saintsbury’s Mr. Ward, for one, is keeping the faith: “People will be talking about Carneros again before too long.”

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