

The Magazine of Western Living

# Sunset

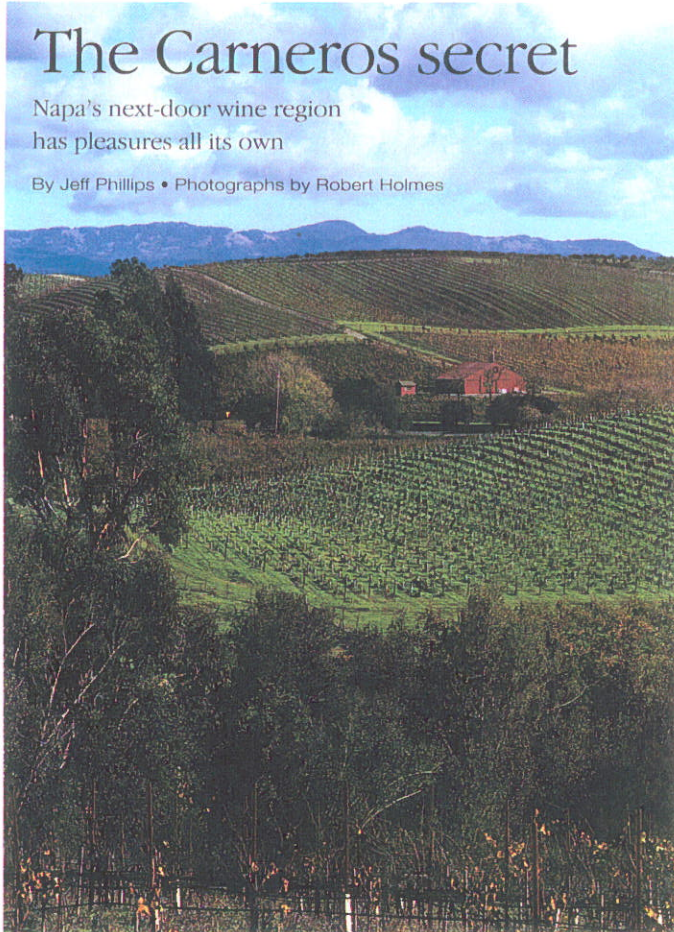
SEPTEMBER 2002

TRAVEL

## The Carneros secret

Napa's next-door wine region has pleasures all its own

By Jeff Phillips • Photographs by Robert Holmes



In autumn the gently rolling patchwork of the Carneros countryside is at its most colorful.



From the slopes behind the winery that bears his name, Walter Schug has a knockout view of the country that winemakers call Los Carneros. To the north is the town of Sonoma; to the south, San Pablo Bay. To the east the Mayacamas Mountains tumble down to long hillsides and undulating flatlands patched with vineyards—which, this time of year, form a wild quilt of reds, yellows, oranges, and greens.

It's a glorious landscape, yet one that is overlooked by many of the visitors who traverse it. Every weekend, drivers crawl along State 12/121 right

through Carneros on their way to the wineries of the Napa and Sonoma Valleys. What they don't realize as they're stuck in second gear is that they're traveling through one of the state's oldest wine regions—and one that is again being appreciated for its distinctive wines, especially the Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays.

### Wines that rise "to 11"

Although vineyards were established in Los Carneros nearly 170 years ago, Schug was one of the first contemporary winemakers to use grapes from the region—in particular, Pinot Noir,

a variety that had not yet gained wide acceptance in the United States. "A wine critic once wrote that those who bet on Carneros were betting on the wrong horse," Schug says, looking out over the long rows of carefully staked vines. "I wish I'd taken him up on that bet."

But it is true that the relatively cool and breezy Carneros is not the easiest region in which to grow grapes. Michael Terrien, winemaker at Acacia, notes that a lot of traditional viticulture just doesn't work here. "It's only been recently that we've all learned how to plant, prune, and irrigate to fit the region," he says.

"Temperature and soil are what set Carneros apart," says Bouchaine Vineyards winemaker David Stevens. "We're very close to San Pablo Bay and have cooler weather than Sonoma and Napa, which gives our grapes a long season to develop." For Stevens, the distinctive flavors of Carneros, especially in the Pinot Noirs, are all fruit related: cherry and berry with hints of Satsuma plum and citrus. "The degree of fruit intensity is definitely higher in Carneros wines," he says. "We're kind of like that scene in the movie *Spinal Tap*—our amplifiers go to 11."

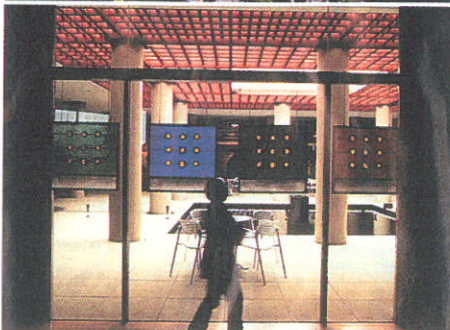
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## History on the vine

Carneros has a long history as a farm region—*los carneros*, originating with the early Spanish land grants here, means “the sheep.” The first vineyards were planted in the late 1830s and the first winery was built here in the 1870s. But it’s only been over the last decade that enough wineries have been built to make a visit worthwhile. This fall a dozen of them will offer public tastings on weekends.

Carneros is easily divided into three regions you can visit in chunks. The west side, along State 121 between State 37 and State 12, includes Schug and Gloria Ferrer, among others. (With Domaine Carneros, Gloria Ferrer is one of the region’s more elegant wineries. Both were originally located here to make sparkling wine but in recent years have expanded into the production of still wines.)

The east side, off Old Sonoma Road between the Carneros Highway and the town of Napa, ranges up into



Sculptural fountains, view-encompassing terraces, and an ultramodern tasting room greet visitors to Artesa Winery.

**Gloria Ferrer.** 23555 State 121; (707) 996-7256.

**Schug Carneros Estate.** 602 Bonneau Rd.; (800) 966-9365.

Wineries are the big draw, but one other great stop can round out a visit.

**Di Rosa Preserve.** This 53-acre oasis showcases more than 2,000 works of art in the landscape and in three galleries. \$12 per person by reservation. 5200 Carneros Hwy.; (707) 226-5991 or [www.dirosapreserve.org](http://www.dirosapreserve.org).

## Dining

While Matthew’s Schellville Grill is the only restaurant technically in Carneros, nearby Sonoma and Napa are full of great places to eat.

**Carneros.** Chef Michael Bilger’s restaurant at the Lodge at Sonoma features

the Mayacamas foothills to wineries like Artesa. And the heart of the Carneros, with the largest concentration of wineries, is the breezy, mostly treeless, gently rolling country south of the Carneros Highway.

The area is certainly pleasant to drive, but if you’re up for exercise, take your bike and make a day of it by combining Cuttings Wharf, Las Amigas, and Ramal Roads into an easy 20-mile out-and-back ride. Start early on the east side, and with luck the prevailing bay winds should be at your back on the return trip. The roads are narrow but lightly traveled.

If you’re feeling especially ambitious, add a detour up Duhig Road—there’s a hill here—to have a glass of bubbly at Domaine Carneros. The terrace off the tasting room, with its views of the vines, is an inviting place to unwind while, it seems, everyone else is stuck in traffic on the Carneros Highway, heading toward Napa. They have no idea what they’re missing.

items like whole-roasted dorade royale and rotisserie chicken—and pairs food with local wines at monthly winemaker dinners.

*Breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. 1325 Broadway, Sonoma; (707) 931-2042.*

**Deuce.** On the south side of Sonoma, Peter and Kirsten Stewart’s yellow farmhouse with a garden patio is where locals go for fine dining with fresh local ingredients at moderate prices. *Lunch and dinner daily. 691 Broadway, Sonoma; (707) 933-3823.*

**Foothill Cafe.** Tucked in a strip mall on Napa’s far west edge, this gem has little curb appeal, but chef Jerry Shaffer packs them in with great food and moderate prices. *Dinner Wed–Sun. 2766 Old Sonoma Rd., Napa; (707) 252-6178.*

**Matthew’s Schellville Grill.** Growers and ranchers start the day with frittatas, omelets, or chicken-fried steak and three eggs in this historic shack just off the Carneros Highway. *Breakfast and lunch daily. 22900 Broadway, Sonoma; (707) 996-5151. ♦*

## Touring Carneros

September, October, and early November are some of the most pleasant months here. The best base for a Carneros visit is the town of Sonoma. For a travel planner, contact the **Sonoma County Tourism Program** (800/380-5392 or [www.sonomacounty.com](http://www.sonomacounty.com)).

## Wineries and more

All the wineries listed below offer tours and tasting on weekends. For a map and a complete list of area wineries, contact the 30-member **Carneros Quality Alliance** (707/938-5906 or [www.carneros.com](http://www.carneros.com)).

**Acacia Vineyards.** Call ahead for tasting. 2750 Las Amigas Rd.; (707) 226-9991.

**Artesa Winery.** 1345 Henry Rd.; (707) 224-1668.

**Bouchaine Vineyards.** 1075 Buchli Station Rd.; (800) 654-9463.

**Domaine Carneros.** 1240 Duhig Rd.; (707) 257-0101.