

La dolce vita—the Wine Country sweet life, in this case—is all about being healthy in both mind and body. The Vintners Inn in Santa Rosa is embracing that idea by welcoming visitors with an immediate sense of calm and the promise of rejuvenation.

The resort was purchased in 2000 by Don and Rhonda Carano, who wanted to extend their hospitality to wine lovers and visitors from around the world by creating a spectacular Wine Country village. The “village” now includes the award-winning Vintners Inn, the renowned John Ash & Company restaurant and the state-of-the-art Vintners Inn Event and Conference Center. They all exist on 92 acres of vineyards and gardens that truly reflect the bounty and beauty of Sonoma County.

*Don and Rhonda
Carano's transformation
of Vintners Inn, John
Ash & Co. and the
Vintners Inn Event and
Conference Center*

Cultivating A Wine Country Village





Back to nature

A great deal of thought and care was put into the renovation and expansion of the property (which originally sat on only 40 acres), not surprising coming from the Caranos. Both husband and wife are second-generation Italian-Americans with a love of fine food and wine and a great appreciation for nature's bounty. As owners of the El Dorado Hotel Casino in Reno, Nevada, they aren't newcomers to hospitality. The Reno natives were searching for wines to enhance the El Dorado's wine lists when they were first introduced to Sonoma County. Their first purchase was a 60-acre parcel in the Alexander Valley, then they acquired additional vineyard land and founded Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery in 1981.

The Ferrari-Carano winery has one of the most spectacular gardens in all of Sonoma County. Rhonda personally designed the winery gardens, and her vision has spilled over to their newer property as well. "The inspiration behind the creation of the gardens at Vintners Inn and John Ash is an extension of what we've created at Ferrari-Carano Winery in Dry Creek Valley," says Carano. An informal elegance and immediate sense of calm is realized when you enter the Vintners Inn driveway. The pebbled walkways and stone pathways are surrounded by lush landscaping. She says

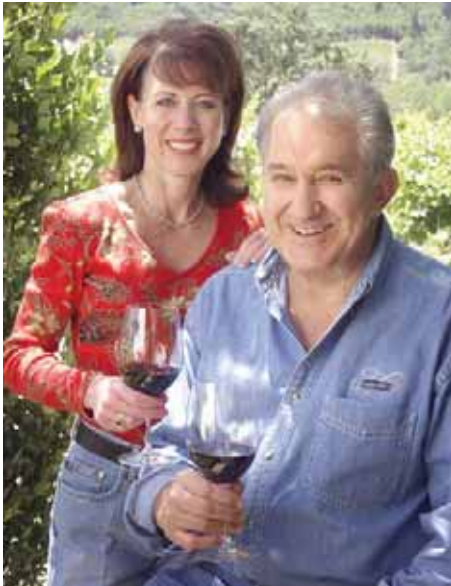
"We're long-time champions of Sonoma County agriculture, wine and food, and our desire is to share this passion with others."

—Rhonda Carano, Vintners Inn

she wants guests to feel "as if they're in a European village set in the middle of a lovely park.

"When we purchased the property, it was in need of renovation. We've completed all the hotel rooms and the inn's public areas including all building exteriors. In addition, we renovated John Ash & Company restaurant, added the outdoor European glass-enclosed terrace, built the Front Room Bar and Lounge, designed by famed restaurateur Pat Kuleto, and the 13,000-square-foot event center," says Rhonda. In all, they spent \$12 million to turn their vision into a reality. Their improvements also included installing additional surface parking areas and acquiring the surrounding 52 vineyard acres that truly make Vintners Inn a quaint Wine Country estate.

The landscaping on the grounds goes way beyond visual appeal. Many plants are both ornamental and edible, like the chives growing in neat clusters near the front door of the restaurant and the Chrysler Imperial roses used for dessert sauces. There are hedges of different varieties of rosemary, 120 olive trees, several different types of pears and apples, numerous berries and produce gardens, whose harvest often consists of vegetables that can't be purchased or transported easily from anywhere else.



Rhonda and Don Carano, proprietors

The Caranos have another garden in Dry Creek that also supplies the restaurant, inn and events center. Currently there are six different types of tomatoes planted there, including golden boys, marble strips and Italian romas that were started from seeds brought back from Italy. Chef Jeffrey Madura says, “The Caranos are amazing to work for, because they understand the importance of freshness and variety and are

willing to experiment.”

One of the reasons Madura came to work at John Ash 20 years ago was because of the abundance of fresh produce available to the restaurant from local farmers. He’d been working at a restaurant called Mudd (in the East Bay) that had full production biodynamic gardens, but knew that Sonoma County’s many microclimates produced an even wider array of seasonal specialties. The Caranos have supported all of Madura’s efforts to incorporate new types of fruits and vegetables into the gardens. This year, the plan is to grow all their own herbs for the whole year. The restaurant currently spends more than \$1,000 a month on herbs, so growing them will dramatically cut this cost; it’ll also give Madura and his staff access to the freshest and highest-quality herbs, all of which will be pesticide free.

Today, all menus are produced in-house, which gives Madura the flexibility to reflect what’s in the garden through his daily offerings. He says it’s “chef heaven” to walk outside the back door and have access to nature’s bounty. Often, guests at the inn see someone from the restaurant harvesting produce and will ask how they plan to prepare it. The staff member will explain how the dishes being prepared for the evening’s menu will include what’s just been picked and, often, the guest will request something containing the product he or she saw coming from the garden. The kitchen contributes to the garden by producing chile oils and soaps made from plant matter that can be sprayed on the plants to keep pests away.

Madura’s request to bring bees to the grounds—not only so they could produce estate honey but also to propagate the numerous plants—was also endorsed by the Caranos. “It’s cause and effect,” says Madura. “Some people don’t know that, without bees, we wouldn’t be able to grow food.” Because there’s currently something killing many bee populations, [see “To Bee...or not to Bee,” July 2007], there are no bees on site yet, but Madura is working with Santa Rosa’s Wine Country Honey to bring healthy bees to the property as soon as it’s feasible.

The Caranos have also invested their money on equipment and processes that may cost more in the short term but in the long run will pay off economically and environmentally. The property has its own wastewater management system, with a four-acre pond of reclaimed water that’s used for irrigation. An ozone system for cleaning linens uses almost no hot water. Linens are one of a hotel’s

most expensive line items, and doing the laundry in-house saves money. It also conserves resources, since the water will be diverted from general sewage and instead be recycled and used to water plants.

Small improvements continue to be made, such as the motion detectors that are being installed in all of the rooms at the inn to regulate both light in the entryways and the heating and cooling systems. This will ensure energy is only used when someone is actually in the room. Low energy-use lightbulbs are also being installed in all rooms and in the conference center (PG&E even has an incentive plan), and the staff and owners are always on the lookout for new ways they can save resources and money through other conservation efforts.

Take a tour

All of the 44 rooms, housed in three separate villas, were remodeled in 2002. The aim was for guests to experience the ambiance of a bed and breakfast (a lovely Continental breakfast is included), but have accommodations with amenities more commonly associated with luxury hotels. Each king-sized feather bed has a down comforter, and all bathrooms include Cali bath products from Italy to enjoy in the soaking tub. A half-bottle of Ferrari-Carano Fume Blanc awaits guests upon their arrival, and a nightly turn-down service features fresh-baked cookies.

All rooms are positioned for privacy, yet still offer views through French doors of the vineyards, gardens or the flower-filled courtyard. Lower-level rooms have private patios and second-story rooms have balconies and fireplaces. All three villas open onto a central courtyard with a large, vibrant fountain, reminiscent of something one might find in a Mediterranean plaza.

If you walk through the front doors of the inn and cross the lawn, you’ll arrive at the event center. It consists of 13,000 square feet of state-of-the-art accommodations to meet the needs of small or large executive retreats, workshops, trade shows, parties and weddings accommodating up to 400 people. It also has a stunning outdoor fireplace and grill—circa 1700 from France—along with 5,000 square feet of outdoor entertaining space.

Pat Kuleto’s (a friend of the Caranos) transformation of the restaurant’s lounge, The Front Room, included adding a fireplace surrounded by comfortable, dark leather chairs; a long, inviting bar; and cathedral ceilings.

It’s the sort of place where locals can relax after a long day at work, and where visitors can cozy up after a day of wine tasting. The addition of unique, floor-to-ceiling glass panels, and large hanging heaters (added to what used to be the outdoor dining patio) encloses the area and increases year-round dinning space. The glass walls don’t compromise the vineyard views and still



Chef Jeffrey Madura



The Vintners Inn rooms are decorated to resemble a bed and breakfast.

gives guests the feeling of alfresco dining among the grapes—even during the cold winter months.

One result of customer demand is a 1.2-mile jogging trail that was added in April 2007. “People love it,” says Percy Brandon, the property’s general manager. He says guests enjoy the contact with nature but still feel safe even though they’re visiting somewhere new. The trail map shows guests how to meander through the vineyards, where often the only creatures sharing their course are wild rabbits. The vineyard crew built the path out of stamped gravel. Attractive, small bridges cover areas of drainage hardware or are used so a jogger

The trail map shows guests how to meander through the vineyards, where often the only creatures sharing their course are wild rabbits.

can cross over small creeks. A full-service spa is also in the works. In the meantime, guests can enjoy an in-room massage or visit an onsite massage room. In-room yoga is also available on request.

Other upgrades include “The Grove,” an area surrounded by a grouping of redwood trees, which was completed last year and includes a bocce ball court. Corporate clients have used the area for team building, and families have even reserved the area and had meals catered there. A wedding pavilion is also visible from the inn’s lobby. With a backdrop of vineyards and surrounding gardens, a bride can make do with minimal floral arrangements because the setting is naturally ornate.

Satisfied customers

Bob Reynolds, chief financial officer of the payroll service company Innovative Business Solutions (IBS), hosted his company’s 2007 holiday party at the Vintners Inn events center—and has already

booked it again for 2008. “Our employees would riot if we chose another location,” he says jokingly, before explaining he was impressed with the site’s attention to detail.

“Robert Jones, who’s in charge of corporate meetings and event sales, was fantastic,” says Reynolds. “No other venue had spent as much time with us during the planning phase.”

Reynolds notes everything from room configuration to entertainment and decorations was discussed, nothing was left out or missed. The conference and event center provided name cards with elegant calligraphy for all employees and their guests—even last minute ones. Everyone at IBS was extremely impressed. Reynolds says another reason they’ll use the center again is the IBS staff didn’t have to get there early to set up, since the center’s staff took care of everything.

IBS was started in 1991, and the first holiday party was at a Round Table pizza parlor. Over the years, it’s grown to include 30 employees (with spouses or guests in tow for their annual event) and has hosted its party at a number of local venues. So far, the staff favorite is the Vintners Inn. As a part of the event package, IBS employees were offered discounted rooms for the evening, which was appreciated, since employees came from as far away as Cloverdale and Petaluma.

Pure Luxury Limousine & Transportation, based in Petaluma, also hosted a holiday party at the Vintners Inn event center. Jennifer Buffo, vice president and chief operating officer, says her company chose the location because of its beauty and elegance. “The attendants, service and waitstaff were hands-on, and the food was fabulous,” she says. Her company has had its party there the last two years, and she’s also been to the center for other events. Pure Luxury Limousine services the hotel and restaurant, takes guests on daily wine tours and shuttles people to and from the airport. Many clients have mentioned they’ve enjoyed staying at Vintners Inn and eating at John Ash & Company.

Rhonda Carano says she wants to provide every guest with the highest level of personal service possible, in an atmosphere of comfortable, Wine Country luxury. “We’re long-time champions of Sonoma County agriculture, wine and food, and our desire is to share this passion with others,” she says of her husband and herself. As long as the Vintners Inn and John Ash & Company continue to offer the exceptional level of service, comfort and quality they have created, there’s no doubt that this Wine Country village will continue to attract people from all over to this exceptional corner of the world. ■

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