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Cheek by jowl, both pinot noir and cabernet thrive



FINE WINE
Roger Morris

It is difficult to imagine a spot in Bordeaux that would produce a great pinot noir. Nor a place in Burgundy that would fully ripen Bordeaux's cabernet sauvignon. Both regions grow what they grow not so much as a matter of tradition or even soil but because of climate. And they will

continue to do so, unless global warming accelerates.

That's what makes the California coast so interesting. The balance of a marine climate with its cold ocean breezes and pervasive fog lures the pinot noir grower, while, just a few miles inland, relentless sunshine makes ripening cabernet a cinch. Some of the world's best cabs come from the heart of Napa Valley, while, 15 minutes away, delicious pinot noir is being grown in the Carneros region. Same with Sonoma.

Now Jim Dierberg wants to make world-class cabernet in the "Sideways" territory of northern Santa Barbara County. Dierberg is a banker from St. Louis who took the family enterprise and extended it into the First Bank franchise. Along the way, he bought Missouri's Hermanoff winery in 1974, and then he and his wife, Mary, decided to go west with their winegrowing in the late 1990s.

Two properties they purchased are in prime pinot noir and chardonnay territory -- the Santa Maria Valley and the Santa Rita Hills -- and produce very good wines under the Dierberg label. But it was a 4,000-acre tract in the eastern end of Santa Ynez Valley that attracted their attention because it is both the highest and hottest vineyard land in the appellation.

Here, Dierberg planted Bordeaux varietals and some syrah. The wines are called Star Lane, and the early cabs are very promising. A third line, Three Saints, produces wine from all three of the "Saint" properties.

"What we're looking for is consistency year after year," Dierberg said in a telephone interview from Star Lane. "Anyone can be successful for one vintage."

Dierberg, who describes himself as a hands-on winemaker, is working with a veteran team in winemaker Nick de Luca and consultants Paul Hobbs and Dave Ramey.

The reason that Bordeaux varietals grow so well at Star Lane is that the 237 planted acres go from hot valley floor, which is still affected by cool nighttime ocean breezes coming up the valley, to hillsides and mountaintops, where the heat is less severe but more constant. The soil varies, but sand, gravel, and cobbles over clay and loam are the primary elements.

Star Lane cabs go for about \$50, syrah \$35, and an excellent sauvignon blanc for around \$20. Dierberg pinot is about \$42, and the chardonnay \$36.

Another attraction for Dierberg is the economy of having only one winery. "The cabernet and pinot noir are only 15 miles apart," he says, "and the roads are good."

And that's a saving Dierberg can take to the bank.

Roger Morris has written about wines for years and regularly visits the winegrowing areas of the world. Write to him at The News Journal, Box 15505, [Wilmington](http://www.delawareonline.com), DE 19850; fax 324-2415; or e-mail features@delawareonline.com.