

Witness a triple play from the Dierberg family of wines

SCHAEFER ON WINE: Dennis Schaefer



THREE SAINTS

2003

SYRAH

Santa Ynez Valley

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Having made Hermannhof Winery the poster boy for winery revival in their home state, the Dierbergs started looking farther afield for winemaking ventures. They toyed with the idea of a property in Bordeaux and traveled up and down the backroads of California, finally discovering a corner of Santa Barbara County they liked.

They are committed to farming three vineyard sites: Dierberg Vineyard in Santa Maria Valley, planted with pinot noir and chardonnay; Star Lane Vineyard on the eastern edge of Santa Ynez Valley for Bordeaux varietals; and a new vineyard project in Santa Rita Hills. Their three labels, with grapes sourced only from their vineyards, reflect the different characteristics of site, varietal and winemaking style.

Wine bottled under the Three Saints label is the most accessible for current drinking; the wine is also relatively inexpensive, given the quality that's in the bottle. The Star Lane label is reserved for the best expression of Bordeaux

varietals from that specific property, while the Dierberg label exemplifies the effort to make world-class pinot noir and chardonnay.

Winemaking is in the capable hands of Nic de Luca, who has experience making wine on several continents. Some thoughts on the current releases:

Three Saints Pinot Noir 2004 (\$20): Aromas of dark fruit mix with toasty sweet oak, while the mouth-filling flavors are of black cherry, dark berry and black plum. This has a sweet core of dark fruit that is open and direct, along with a spicy undertone from the oak. It's no shrinking violet, leaning toward the heavier, darker spectrum of pinot flavors. A best buy in anyone's book. There's plenty to like here, including the lengthy finish.

Three Saints Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 (\$17.50): White chocolate and mint nuances mix with aromas of dark fruits and cassis. Soft in the mouth and ready to drink (that's a good thing), the wine's blackberry and plum fruit is hung on a classical cabernet structure despite its easily accessible flavors. It's meant to be approachable and eminently drinkable in its youth, not some hard-shell cab that you cellar for 10 years. Enjoy and drink it now.

Three Saints Merlot 2003 (\$17.50): Full-on aromas of black cherry and plum are prominent, and those dark fruit flavors show up on the palate along with a streak of wild cherry, chocolate and cassis. Again, not a wimpy wine like most modern merlots, this one has flavor complexity and a backbone with some still-as-yet-unresolved tannins, suggesting this is a merlot that cabernet drinkers would warm up to.

Three Saints Syrah 2003 (\$17.50): Bright, juicy plum aromatics and flavors are inviting with additional components of spiciness, chalkiness and minerality. It just gushes with fruit on the midpalate with more flavors of blueberry and boysenberry that are fresh and refreshing. Very much a fruit-forward wine, with good acidity and a great finish, this is an everyday syrah that's simply a delicious wine for the daily dining table. Another best buy.

Three Saints Chardonnay 2003 (\$20): Oaky and smoky, with roasted nuts on the nose from the ambitious use of plenty of new French oak. Lemon curd and cranberry flavors are concentrated and chewy, along with plenty of wood smoke and roasted nuts in the foreground. A very popular style of chardonnay, but perhaps a little too much oak in the mix for my taste.

Star Lane Sauvignon Blanc 2005 (\$20): A citrusy nose with lemon peel and just a hint of green herbs is a good sign. The lemon/citrus flavors are backed up with plenty of palate-cleansing acidity, making this a perfect wine for the summer patio table. Unlike most sauvignon blancs that taste watered down, this one is all grown up with plenty of varietal flavor as well as texture and complexity.

Star Lane Syrah 2003 (\$35): Hard-core dark fruit aromatics are at the center of things when you swirl this one in the glass. And swirl you must, because it's very tightly wound -- like a fist -- right out of the bottle (decant it, if you like). This is not your bright and sunny syrah, but rather a deep dish of dark plum, blueberry and blackberry fruit. Everything in this bottling is lined up in order, but it really needs time in the bottle to show its potential greatness. Dark, rich and earthy, I like the way it's starting to come around now; it will age well, too.

Dierberg Pinot Noir, Santa Maria Valley 2004 (\$38): Fermented hot on the skins, this dark pinot has plenty more dark aromatics to match its color. Decanting is in order to give the wine some air and let it breathe. After about five minutes in the glass, this compacted beauty starts to open up with flavors of dark plum, red cherry and sour black cherry, along with a streak of brown spices and what must be an intentional level of richness that coats the palate with texture and a lingering finish.

Dierberg Chardonnay, Santa Maria Valley 2004 (\$35, to be released in September): Both the aromatics and flavors of this outstanding chardonnay will take you aback. Fresh citrus, lemon curd, pineapple and guava along with vanilla bean and sweet, toasty oak from the barrel aging. One of the best Santa Barbara chards in recent memory, it's appealingly lush and full-bodied but well-balanced.

Wine expert Dennis Schaefer's column appears every other week in the Food section. E-mail life@newspress.com.