

Los Angeles Times

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2000

The Queen of Charbono

By **ROD SMITH**
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

North of Fort Bragg, Highway 1 becomes a two-lane country road meandering through coastal towns that are little more than speed traps with live bait and beer. The Northern California landscape turns from redwoods to scrub pines and finally opens up to a barren plain sloping down to the sea.

That's where an incongruous sight meets the eyes: a vineyard and winery right on the edge of the waves. Pacific Star, 12 miles north of Fort Bragg, must be the only winery in the world where wine fans can watch migrating whales from the tasting room.

In fact, the two-acre vineyard may not be in the right place. The vines look as if they wish they were growing somewhere else, in a warmer place free of sea fog, salt spray and biting wind.

No matter. The vineyard adjoining the winery seems to be mostly symbolic. Pacific Star's focus is a range of luscious red wines from very old vineyards in the warm inland valleys of the Mendocino Plateau. The growers have names like Bartolomei,

Ventura and Graziano. Their vines have names like Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, Charbono and Carignane.

At a time when claiming some connection with California history is an increasingly popular marketing ploy, these old vineyards are the real thing-heritage vineyards planted by Italian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and lovingly tended by their children and grandchildren.

"Those vines have been passed through generations," Pacific Star founder and winemaker Sally Ottoson says. "The land is paid for, and the taxes are low. They don't have to pull out the old vines and replant to Merlot or Chardonnay in order to make money. And the new generation realizes what a treasure they have."

Ottoson, who has made wine in the Napa Valley (at Star Hill) as well as on the Mendocino coast, turns small lots of grapes from those low-yielding old vines into some of California's most distinctive wines-with a little help from the sea. Apparently there is more to the winery's location than stunning views: The nature of the place seems to have a significant effect

on the character of the wines.

For example, Ottoson says the incessant pounding of the surf clarifies the wines naturally eliminating the need for fining or filtration. "In Napa," she notes, "the wines are still pretty soupy at the first racking in January. Here, they're already bright and clear."

She believes that particles are precipitated out of solution by the steady subterranean vibrations caused by waves crashing into the coast's many sea caves, one of which extends right underneath the winery. She likens the phenomenon to the riddling process that clarifies Champagne by gentle agitation of the bottle over many months.

"The larger solids sift down and drag the smaller particles along" she explains.

Another site-specific aspect of Pacific Star winemaking is salt. It's everywhere; with the mighty Pacific churning constantly just outside the winery doors, everything is covered with a fine layer of sea salt. That includes the barrels, and Ottoson believes the coating of salt on the barrels has a dramatic effect on wine quality.

PACIFIC *Star* WINERY

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