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Thursday,

- FRONT PAGE
- LOCAL
- NATIONAL
- WORLD
- WEATHER
- EDITORIALS
- OPINIONS-LETTERS
- SPORTS
- SCENE
- LIFE**
- REAL ESTATE
- CLASSIFIEDS
- BUSINESS
- ADVERTISING INFO
- SPECIAL SECTIONS
- FEATURES
- ARCHIVES
- REPRINT FORMS
- SITE INDEX
- PHOTO
- GALLERY-NEW
- OKIES

Life

[Home » Life](#)

[Email Story](#)

[Print Story](#)

Seriously delicious wines emerge from Adelaida

SCHAEFER ON WINE: Dennis Schaefer



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Anyone who's followed Central Coast wineries over the last two decades knows the name, Adelaida Cellars. Tucked back in the rolling hills of the west side of Paso Robles, the winery was established in 1981, changed hands to its present owner, the Van Steenwyk family, in 1991, and acquired the fabled HMR Vineyard in 1994. The latter is the oldest pinot noir vineyard on the Central Coast, planted by Dr. Stanley Hoffman in 1963.

I always felt the great potential of Adelaida Cellars' vineyard sites went unrealized, because its extensive use of American oak, for both fermenting and aging, really obscured the pristine quality of the grapes. And I'm guessing that's what attracted Terry Culton to sign on as winemaker: He saw the potential and he was confident he could make great progress.

Mr. Culton put in time at Scharffenberger, Wild Horse, Edmeades and, most recently, at Calera. I don't know if it was fate that brought him to Adelaida but he seems perfectly matched to the challenge of multiple varietals and the contrasting vineyard terrain. He lets each wine be what it's supposed to be, and he does it with a sense of finesse and style.

And by the way, for those of you who still labor under the illusion that Paso Robles is too warm an area to produce world class wines, the Adelaida vineyards are a mere 16 miles from the ocean and, during the summer, the daily temperature swings can be as much as 50 degrees, perfect for developing grape sugars, acidity and ripeness.

Some notes on their current releases, all of which are seriously delicious and highly recommended:

- Rhone Style White 2004: This combo of equal parts grenache blanc and roussanne is an unusual white wine blend, not seen much in California. With a bright, pretty mouthfeel, it is very lively as the grenache blanc provides structure while the roussanne provides minerality. The florals from the latter are obvious and, without being super buttery, it has a fatness and roundness that is mouth coating. Very food friendly.
- Viognier, Glen Rose Vineyard 2004: Very perfumed aromatics lead the way, including apricot, peach and nectarine. On entry, it seems lean, but then explodes on mid-palate to gush a persistent core of mixed stonefruit flavors and minerality. Amazingly, it's not over the top -- its flavors are contained and perfectly aligned with the weight of the wine. Extremely tactile viscous and sensuous, this is one of the top viogniers I have ever tasted.
- Rhone Style Red 2003: Cigar box, white pepper, spice and a bit of leather comes through on the nose, reminding me of a full-on Cotes du Rhones from a very good vintage. A kitchen sink blend of Rhone varietals, it is perhaps the most pinotesque wine of the Rhone style Adelaida lineup. The heavier flavors, dark plum and blackberry, come from the big chunk of mourvedre in the blend, but the softness and other well-fruited flavors come from the skillful blending.
- Syrah 2003: Juicy, fruity and sappy in the mouth, Adelaida's entry level syrah is typical of this varietal as grown in Paso Robles. The bright fruit has a wonderful mouthfeel that seems polished to remove any hard or tannic edges. So, while it doesn't have a lot of depth or complexity, it sings with pristine, ripe blue/black fruit flavors. And I like the way it sneaks up on your palate with its hits of lavender and melted milk chocolate on the finish. Yum!
- Syrah Reserve, Viking Vineyard 2003: Starting here, the Adelaida syrahs get serious, ramping up the pleasure factors with more of everything. This is a big structured red with blackberries and toasty oak the most obvious things, but there is also an elegance here with several layers of complexity and plenty more fruit flavors and minerals on the back side. Juicy with ripe fruit and good tannins that hang in the mouth and bode well for aging, this wine reminds me of the old extracted Eberle syrahs, though this is much more refined.
- Syrah Reserve, Glenrose Vineyard 2003: A horse of a different color, this one starts out with a huge smoky, toasty and meaty nose. That meatiness carries over in the mouth, along with dark blackberry and cassis fruit flavors. This one is much more fleshy and expansive, sort of the Mae West of syrahs with its full bodied voluptuousness. The difference here is the particular syrah clone and the age of the vineyard. My fave of the bunch, this wine has the stuffing to go the distance and age well, though it's ready to rumble right now with duck, venison or wild boar.



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- Pinot Noir, HMR Vineyard 2003: Sweet delectable fruit in the mouth with this pinot that is more elegant than intense (and that's a good thing!). Ripe cherry and vanilla flavors are very pretty and well balanced with the acidity and structure of the wine. And while it's delicate, it still totally caresses the mouth with sweetness and light. The flavors are cumulative on the palate and are sustained all the way to the bright finish.

- Pinot Noir Reserve 2003: The definitive and classic pinot nose of sweet fruit and spice easily comes through in this bottling that saw plenty of French oak and then aged an extra year in the bottle. It was certainly worth it. The sweet cherry fruit makes delicate and lacy patterns of flavors in the mouth; as you savor it, you discover another nuance, another level of complexity. You can drink it now as it's just starting to show well, but the tannins indicate that it has the staying power to age for another five years and then really strut its stuff.

- Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, Estate 2002: Big and rich is not just the name of a country music group, it's also the description for this boisterous cabernet. It definitely (and decadently) has the true varietal flavors of ripe black fruits and cassis going for it. Moderately concentrated on the mid palate, where it hits a sweet spot and shows a bit of Italian herbs, it rolls to a sustained lip-smacking finish.

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

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