

Paradise is right at your fingertips.

Announcing new service to Hilo, Hawaii,
beginning June 11.

Flights are operated by Continental Airlines.

Search



SFGate



Web Search by **YAHOO!**



Businesses | Advanced

[Home](#)

[News](#)

[Sports](#)

[Business](#)

[Entertainment](#)

[Food](#)

[Living](#)

[Travel](#)

[Columns](#)

[Buy](#)

[Restaurants](#) | [Recipes](#) | [Wine](#) | [Top 100 Restaurants](#) | [Top 100 Wines](#) | [Bargain Bites](#) | [Reservations](#) | [Inside Sc](#)

Red Car revs up Syrah, Pinot Noir

Carey Sweet, Special to The Chronicle
Thursday, June 2, 2011

PRINT E-MAIL SHARE COMMENTS (0)

FONT | SIZE:



Lacy Atkins / The Chronicle

Red Car owner Carroll Kemp does some barrel tasting at the winery.

IMAGES



[View Larger Images](#)

That same year, Red Car motored over to Sonoma, making a 2002 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. In 2004, Kemp and Estrin purchased Red Car's estate vineyard on a Fort Ross mountaintop, and as of the 2009 vintage, all wines are now made with Sonoma fruit.

The vibe: A smack of cool, cheerful culture comes to this cool-climate area. The winery name is a tribute to the electric trolley cars that ran throughout Los Angeles from the late 19th century through the early 1960s, so it's only appropriate that the tasting room that opened in November occupies what was formerly a tractor sales space next to the Dutton-Goldfield tasting room on Graton Road just west of Gravenstein Highway.

When Red Car owners Carroll Kemp and Mark Estrin started toying with the idea of becoming vintners back in 2000, they picked a rather ambitious guinea pig for their first vintage: the wine director of the French Laundry.

Their inaugural Syrah, from Santa Barbara County grapes, was an instant hit, and all 50 cases sold out as soon as they were released in 2002. Not bad for a Beverly Hills-based film producer (Kemp) and screenwriter (Estrin), monkeying with winemaking in their garages.

3

Tweet

0

share

Follow the giant yellow arrow, dangling from the roof overhang, and turn left at the faux traffic signals. It's fun, like a set design, as you straddle a motorcycle seat or hop on an antique wood swivel stool at the glossy bar. Much of the decor came from local antique shops: a green velvet couch, a stuffed fish, a funky truck grill made into a sconce that looks like the Pixar character Wall-E. And in one corner, there are jackalope skulls hung with necklaces designed by Kemp's wife, Pade Vavra (she has made baubles for Charlize Theron and Gwyneth Paltrow).


The team: Kemp is the winemaker. Estrin passed away in 2005. As they say in the movies, one of the original "money men" is Richard Crowell, Red Car's chairman and founding partner of Vance Street Capital private equity firm. When the crew moved to Sonoma, they scored by landing local vineyard celebrity Ulises Valdez.

The wines: Syrahs (\$20-\$45) and Pinot Noirs (\$28-\$65) still get top billing, in three tiers called Boxcar, Trolley and Reserve. There's also a Chardonnay (\$23) and reserve Roussanne, with all the wines drawn from an array of boutique vineyards in such spots as Fort Ross, Freestone and Bennett Valley. More than a decade after Red Car's debut, the fleet remains small, with total production at 6,000 cases a year.

The experience: Get six wines for \$10, and you'll probably also receive random pours of whatever else appeals and is open. We enjoyed bonus samples of 2009 the Pearl Roussanne (\$38), even though there were only a dozen cases remaining. Does wine taste even better when the host clearly loves it? Our guide entertained with animated descriptions like this for the 2008 Trolley Syrah (\$38): "Flowing from fruit, to flower, to pepper dancing on the tongue; totally Willy Wonka's Everlasting Gobstoppers." We asked him about the soil specifics of each vineyard, and he knew, quickly adding tips about each wine's aging potential and decanting recommendations.

The extras: Just looking at the eclectic labels is art appreciation 101, particularly as our host shared the inspiration behind each. The 2009 Dreamland Pinot Noir (\$60) label was licensed from Mark Ryden, who designed Michael Jackson's "Dangerous" album, while there was something deliciously bohemian about studying the swirling bull's-eye graphic of the 2009 Aphorist Pinot Noir (\$60) as the Beatles' "I Am the Walrus" careened in the background.

Nearby: Dutton-Goldfield Winery, 3100 Gravenstein Highway N., Sebastopol.

 (707) 827-3600  . duttongoldfield.com. Merry Edwards Winery, 2959 Gravenstein Highway N., Sebastopol.  (888) 388-9050  . merryedwards.com. Graton Ridge Cellars, 3561 Gravenstein Highway N., Sebastopol.  (707) 823-3040  . gratonridge.com.

If you go: 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily. 8400 Graton Road, Sebastopol.

 (707) 829-8500  . redcarwine.com.

Rating: Rating: THREE AND A HALF STARS

*This article appeared on page **NN - 3** of the San Francisco Chronicle*