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Healdsburg's new Sicily-inspired winery is pouring the best white wine you've never heard of

**Downtown Healdsburg's Aeris is likely the first California winery to produce Carricante, a coveted Italian varietal**

By Esther Mobley  
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*Jade Hufford (left) and Evan Hufford taste wines at the new Aeris Wines tasting room in downtown Healdsburg.*

One of the most coveted white wines from Italy, rarely seen in California, is finally coming into the spotlight. Carricante, a grape variety from Sicily, is now considered by some experts to be the finest white-wine variety anywhere in Italy, and wine geeks have developed a craze for it in recent years. Though it's still relatively obscure by global standards, Bay Area shops and restaurants can seldom keep Carricantes from top

Sicilian producers like Benanti, Salvo Foti and Pietradolce in stock, so coveted have they become among the cognoscenti.

Now, a new tasting room is opening in downtown Healdsburg that will serve Sonoma-grown Carricante — the first example of the variety to be made in California, its owner believes. Aeris Wines, which has been quietly open for a few weeks and will host a grand opening event on Feb. 11, likely represents the only winery in the state focusing so singularly on the wines of Sicily. Its opening could broaden the visibility and prestige of Italian-style wines, a category that's never proliferated in California in the way that French wine traditions have.

Carricante can result in intense white wines: creamy and full, yet nervy with a tingling acidity, explosive with flavors and aromas like jasmine flower, honeysuckle and beeswax. Reds from Sicily, made from grapes like Nerello Mascalese, are often effusively aromatic and light in alcohol, tasting both fruity and earthy. Bottles from Sicilian producers like Frank Cornelissen and Arianna Occhipinti have become mainstays on the shelves of hip wine shops throughout California in recent years.

Given Sicilian wine's growing popularity, Aeris seems poised to spread that island fervor widely and possibly turn the larger public on to the magic, especially, of Carricante. At least that's what vintner Kevin Harvey is hoping for.



*Aeris Wines at the new tasting room in downtown Healdsburg.*

To spread the Sicilian-wine gospel, Harvey is banking on his success running one of California's most critically acclaimed wineries, Rhys Vineyards. The Santa Cruz Mountains winery makes some of the state's most sought-after Pinot Noirs — New York Times critic Eric Asimov proclaimed them among the best in California, and British critic Jancis Robinson once said they're among the most ambitious Pinots made anywhere in the world. Rhys' single-vineyard wines from sites like its Alpine Vineyard and Skyline Vineyard routinely sell out, snatched up entirely by the winery's mailing list customers.

Rhys' Los Gatos winery has never been open to the public. With Aeris, however, Harvey decided to break with the low profile by opening a tasting room — smack in the middle of downtown Healdsburg, no less — after realizing that these wines could use a little more publicity. A Sicilian-theme label is esoteric enough that it requires some direct outreach. Lots of people already know they're Pinot Noir drinkers, but relatively few have been awakened to the wonders of Carricante.

Aeris has been in the works since 2009. That's when Harvey started scouting sites that might be well suited to Sicilian grapes, applying the same kind of scientific rigor that led him to Rhys Vineyards. He ultimately found a plot of land that he deemed perfect on the outskirts of Healdsburg, at the western edge of Dry Creek Valley near Lake Sonoma.

Along with winemaker Jeff Brinkman and viticulturist Javier Tapia Meza, Harvey planted 25 acres of Italian grapes, including Carricante and Sicily's signature red varieties, Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Capuccio. They also planted Nebbiolo, the red grape of Italy's Piedmont region that produces famous wines like Barolo and Barbaresco. They called the site Centennial Mountain Vineyard.

Meanwhile, Harvey bought two vineyards in Sicily itself, and enlisted Salvo Foti — the Sicilian winemaker whose Carricantes had first turned Harvey on to the grape — as his on-the-ground winemaker there. One of the vineyards, on the north side of Mount Etna, was a neglected cropping of 100-year-old Nerello Mascalese vines, which Foti is nursing back to health.

The addition of these Sicilian wines makes Aeris an especially intriguing endeavor. The label will position California-grown versions of Carricante, Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Capuccio and other grapes alongside Sicily-grown versions. The chance to taste the wines alongside each other is a thrilling prospect.



*Rhys Vineyards owner Kevin Harvey (sitting) with members of his winemaking team for his new label, Aeris Wines. From left: assistant winemaker Eric Prah, winemaker Jeff Brinkman and viticulturist Javier Tapia Meza at their new tasting room in downtown Healdsburg. Rhys produces wines in both California and Sicily.*

Plenty of people who got rich in Silicon Valley have bought vineyards or started wineries; few betray the obsessive attention to minutia that Harvey does. Extensive weather modeling led him to believe that the Centennial Mountain site is as closely aligned to the climate of Sicily as any part of California, with similar degrees of heat accumulation and a similar shift from day to night temperatures.

California's wine industry is Francophile: Virtually all of our most recognizable grape varieties, from Chardonnay to Cabernet Sauvignon to Pinot Noir, come from France, as do our oak barrels, our winemaking techniques and even our lexicon (just think of all the wineries here with "chateau" or "domaine" in their names). Though there is a contingent of California wineries growing Italian grapes like Barbera and Sangiovese, it remains a notable minority.

Harvey has a theory about that. "There's a reason Italian varieties haven't taken off as much in the U.S.," he said. "And it's because of climate."

He believes that many Italian grape varieties — including those grown in Sicily — thrive in a climate with a low diurnal shift, meaning there’s not a big variation between the daytime and nighttime temperatures. This runs counter to a significant piece of California-wine conventional wisdom, which holds that larger diurnal shifts always lead to better wines. Many parts of Napa and Sonoma counties, for example, have hot days but cold nights; it might swing by 40 degrees within a 24-hour period. That’s thought to give the grapes the best of both worlds: The hot sunshine gets them juicy and ripe, and the cool night air helps them retain acidity. That’s fine for some French grapes, Harvey said, but it’s not ideal for grapes like Carricante and Nerello Mascalese. (He also believes that Nebbiolo requires a lower diurnal shift.)

In other words, AERIS is a provocative project, one that maybe could only be undertaken by someone with Harvey’s resources and with a venture capitalist’s tolerance for high odds of failure. Throughout the long AERIS journey — finding Centennial Mountain, planting the vines, waiting years for them to bear fruit, then waiting more years for the wines to be ready to sell — Harvey continually wondered whether the bet would pay off. No one knew whether Carricante or Nerello Mascalese would take to these soils; he claims neither had ever been grown here before. Moreover, no one, least of all Harvey, knew whether people would want to buy them.

When I interviewed him about AERIS in 2017, long before any of the wines had been released, he said he had roughly estimated the break-even point for his bet. AERIS could succeed, he calculated, if 20% of Rhys customers bought the wines and his estimation was spot on.

“Honestly, I was kind of hoping for more,” said Harvey.

He hopes the tasting room will amplify the message. Located in the Healdsburg Avenue storefront that was previously home to Stonestreet, a Jackson Family Wines brand, it feels like a warm, inviting wine bar, with seating at a counter, at small tables and in lounge areas. Alongside one wall are large murals, depicting maps of the areas where Rhys grows grapes. Hammered into those same walls are the heads of large, oval wooden casks from Austria — the traditional vessel in which AERIS wines are fermented and aged.



*The AERIS Wines tasting room in downtown Healdsburg.*



To start, the tasting room will offer two different flights. The first (\$40) will consist of three Aeris wines: for now, 2017 versions of the Centennial Mountain Bianco, the Sicilian Carricante and a red blend from Centennial Mountain. The other flight (\$45) will show two Chardonnays and two Pinot Noirs from the Alesia label, which are Rhys' entry-level wines. (You can also opt to taste all available wines for \$80.)

As more of the Aeris wines start to come online — most require about four years between harvesting the grapes and releasing the bottles — the options will expand. By the spring, Aeris will release new vintages of its two Sonoma County Carricantes, its first Nebbiolo, a Zinfandel and more. Still, Harvey said, running out of wine is a concern. Thick smoke from the 2020 wildfires meant he wasn't able to make any wine from Centennial Mountain Vineyard that year, which will deplete his inventory for some time.

He's unsure the Aeris bet will pay off. It helps that the wines are excellent, and anyone who likes the Rhys wines is bound to fall for them. The Centennial Mountain Bricco Rosso, a blend of several red grapes, has a silky texture and a pulsing, energetic core of dusty red cherry. If you're a Pinot person, think of it as an earthier, more rustic answer to Pinot Noir. The Centennial Mountain Bianco, one of two Carricantes Aeris makes from the Sonoma County site, is lusciously floral, reminiscent of pears and green apples — not unlike a leaner, unoaked Chardonnay.

But it's really Aeris' Carricante from Sicily's Etna area that will convert a nonbeliever into a worshiper. The 2018 Etna Bianco Superiore smells like caramel and marzipan, with that signature Carricante whiff of honeysuckle — just achingly aromatic. It's a richer, bigger wine than its Centennial Mountain counterparts, with a waxy, honeyed texture so indelible that you'll still be feeling its sensation an hour later. Surely, with wines like these, the word will get out eventually.