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## Rhys Vineyards' Kevin Harvey turns to Italian-style wines in Sonoma

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*Winemaker Jeff Brinkman draws oxygen into the wine during a tasting session with Rhys Winery owner Kevin Harvey in the background on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*

California, according to Kevin Harvey, has never gotten Italian-inspired wines quite right. He plans to change that.

“So many Cal-Ital projects have failed,” the vintner says. “At the low end, it’s not differentiated from the available cheap Italian wines. At the high end, nobody’s really tried.”

(No doubt many California producers of Italian-style wines — Massican, Idlewild, Villa Creek, Bella Luna, Giornata, Palmina and Castelli among them — would take issue with this statement, but Harvey’s sticking to it.)

Harvey is not an obvious candidate for a Cal-Ital revival. In the last decade he’s become a hero to the Burgundy-worshipping set, thanks to the ethereal Pinot Noirs he makes under his Rhys Vineyards label in the Santa Cruz Mountains — the result of rigorous geological study and meticulous vineyard plantings. The Rhys Pinots have attracted an eager waiting list of customers and rhapsodic reviews from critics. “The wines aren’t just great; they’re *significant*,” wrote former Chronicle wine editor Jon Bonne of Rhys in 2011.



*Kevin Harvey, owner of Rhys Winery at he entry to his cave on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*



*Kevin Harvey, Rhys Winery owner and winemaker Jeff Brinkman taste Italian grapes-focused wine on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*



*Kevin Harvey, Rhys Winery owner, tastes samples with winemaker Jeff Brinkman at right on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*



*Rhys Winery CFO and vineyard manager Javier Tapiaon in one of their vineyards on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*



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*Winemaker Jeff Brinkman tastes samples on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*



*Wine samples to be tasted at Rhys Winery on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*



*Kevin Harvey, clockwise from left, Jeff Brinkman, assistant winemaker Eric Prah and Javier Tapia taste wines at the winery.*

So Harvey's launching of his new Italian-inspired wine label, Aeris (Latin for "air"), comes with some built-in gravitas. And the vineyard he has planted for Aeris, which he's calling Centennial Mountain Vineyard, is as ambitious as any of the Rhys sites, high on a remote coastal ridgetop west of Lake Sonoma.

Like Rhys, Aeris is not a corner-cutting operation. When Harvey wants to make a new wine, he plants a new vineyard. (A successful career in Silicon Valley — he founded the venture capital firm Benchmark — helps to fund these developments.) He rarely lands in tried-and-true wine regions. Relentless curiosity has led Harvey to vertiginous slopes along the San Andreas Fault line, to the deep end of the Anderson Valley, to the hills above Gilroy. (The latter, called the Mt. Pajaro Vineyard, has Chenin Blanc and Riesling planted.) Harvey's approach to viticulture is empirical and data-driven; the man is obsessed with spreadsheets. He's been working on a magnum opus spreadsheet, which compares historical weather data among different wine regions — informing Harvey's decisions of where to plant what — for 15 years.

Like so many Burgundy lovers, Kevin Harvey is also a Piedmont fanatic. That's why Nebbiolo, the grape that comprises the great red wines of Barolo and Barbaresco, is a central focus of AERIS. The other focus, perhaps improbably, is Carricante, a white grape variety from Sicily. The grapes Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Capuccio, Barbera, Primitivo and Zinfandel are also planted at Centennial Mountain.

"If Carricante is as successful in California as I think it could be," Harvey says, "this could be a key grape for unlocking some of California's climates that are too warm for Chardonnay."

Chances are, you've never tasted a Carricante wine. Even in its home of Sicily it's sparsely planted — just 361 acres (out of about 312,000 on the island) as of 2013. In California, forget it. The U.S. Department of Agriculture doesn't even list the grape in its 2017 crop acreage report.

Rhys Winery CFO and vineyard manager Javier Tapias in one of their vineyards on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif. Paul Kuroda/Special to The Chronicle  
Yet Harvey believes that Carricante, if grown in the right places and vinified in the right ways, has the potential to be one of the great white wines of the world — maybe *the* great white wine. Carricante can achieve huge flavor at low alcohol levels, detonate with aromatic complexity and taste like citrus, orange blossoms, fennel, honey. It's often relentlessly sea-salty, with the kind of searing acid you'd expect from fine Riesling. It may be the best white wine you've never tasted.

Harvey's Carricante revelation came in a bottle of 2001 Benanti Pietramarina, from the Etna Bianco Superiore appellation, tasted on a trip to Italy. "It was like grand cru white Burgundy," Harvey recalls. "Or maybe more like (the Alsatian Riesling) Clos Saint Hune — the aromatics, the complexity. I was fascinated by it."

In addition to the Centennial Mountain plantings, Harvey also went in on a Carricante vineyard in Sicily with Salvo Foti, the winemaker behind that fateful Pietramarina. From that vineyard, too, he's making a Carricante wine under the AERIS label, to be released in 2018 — the first of the AERIS wines available for purchase.

As for Nebbiolo, Harvey's is hardly the first attempt. California producers like Giornata, Palmina and Castelli have staked identities on the grape, often to great acclaim. But there are deep misconceptions about the appropriate growing conditions for Nebbiolo, Harvey says: specifically, that Nebbiolo thrives in Piedmont because of that region's limestone soils and its cool climate.

But not all of Piedmont has limestone — the Gattinara area, for instance, is all schist. And Harvey dismisses the cool-climate myth outright. "There's these assumptions that Piemonte is so cold, and all of California is like the Mojave Desert," he says. "Nebbiolo actually needs heat." Nebbiolo requires just as much heat accumulation as Grenache, a famously heat-loving grape, he claims, though it requires that heat over a longer



growing season. In 2007, he planted Nebbiolo vines at his Horseshoe Vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and it wasn't hot *enough*: "The grapes didn't even turn red."



*Javier Tapia on take notes on wine samples on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*

What Nebbiolo wants, Harvey decided, is a relatively low diurnal shift: cooler days and warmer nights — the opposite of what you'll find in most of California. Although California wine regions are often praised precisely for their high daily temperature variations, Nebbiolo needs the lower diurnal, Harvey says, "so that you're not burning off complex aromatics during the day."

After abandoning the grape at Horseshoe, Harvey determined a set of characteristics he would need for a successful Nebbiolo site: somewhere with high heat accumulation and a low diurnal shift, schist-based soils, about 15 miles from the ocean, at an altitude of at least 2,000 feet. Centennial Mountain, perched on this ridgetop outside of Dry Creek Valley, checked all the boxes. In 2012 he planted 25 acres of grapevines here.

Sitting at a picnic table overlooking the Centennial Mountain Vineyard, I taste a few cask samples of the Aeris wines with Harvey, winemaker Jeff Brinkman and vineyard manager Javier Tapia. A 2016 Nerello Capuccio — a red grape used in Etna Rosso wines — is velvety, fresh and dewy, concentrated but not excessively tannic. A 2016 Zinfandel (the vineyard's outlier grape, maybe, though a traditionally safe bet in this part of Sonoma) is gorgeous already, but still primary — structured, woody and floral, its strawberry-tinged fruit lifted by fresh acidity.

The 2016 Nebbiolo is closed right now, reticent. It's light, the color of brick and rough with tannins — not nearly as much tannin, still, as young Piedmont wines. It shows typical Nebbiolo characters of terra-cotta, sanguinity, cherry and anise. I find it promising. Harvey isn't satisfied. He won't be releasing any of these 2016s: "We've got

one chance to make a first impression,” he says. “So if we err, we’ll err on the side of not releasing.”



*Winemaker Jeff Brinkman draws oxygen into the wine during a tasting session on Monday, Nov. 13, 2017 in Los Gatos, Calif.*

Commercially, Harvey concedes Aeris is a risky move. “This whole project is probably unviable,” he says, “except that we *might* be able to succeed if just 20 percent of our Rhys customer base buys.” But will they buy just one bottle of Nebbiolo and Carricante, then return to the more familiar Rhys Pinots and Chardonnays? That’s his fear. (The Aeris wines will cost between \$39 and \$59 per bottle.)

Still, there will be one Aeris wine released in 2018: the 2014 Aeris Etna Bianco Superiore from Sicily, from the vineyard partnership with Salvo Foti. The wine is “very close to 100 percent” Carricante, Harvey says. That’s crucial. True Carricante — as opposed to the Etna Biancos commonly diluted with simpler, blander grapes — is the sort of stuff that induces revelations. It did for Harvey, and it did for me.

Will the 2014 Aeris Etna Bianco Superiore be the best white wine you’ll ever taste? I won’t go that far. Yet it’s an unquestionably delicious wine. Salty, yes, and explosively aromatic, it shows both a diesel oil note like you’d expect from Riesling and a lanolin note like you’d expect from Chenin Blanc. It will be the most unusual wine you’ve tasted in a long time. Depending on the week, it could easily be the best white wine you drink that week. Until, that is, you get your hands on an aged bottle of Foti’s Pietramarina.