

Wine

California Subdivisions

By Michael Franz
Special to Washington Post

Since almost everyone I know these days leads a life that is perilously hectic and complicated, I'd love to tell you that buying good wine is simple. But it just ain't so. Former refuges of simplicity like Napa and Sonoma are being subdivided into ever smaller growing areas tuned to the needs of specific grapes, and a knowledge of districts like the Russian River Valley and Carneros has become indispensable for savvy consumers.

Today, to simply search for a wine that hails from Napa or Sonoma is to cast your net too broadly. French wines provide an analogy: Buy a bottle with a heralded but overly broad designation like "Bordeaux" or "Burgundy," and you're likely to be stuck

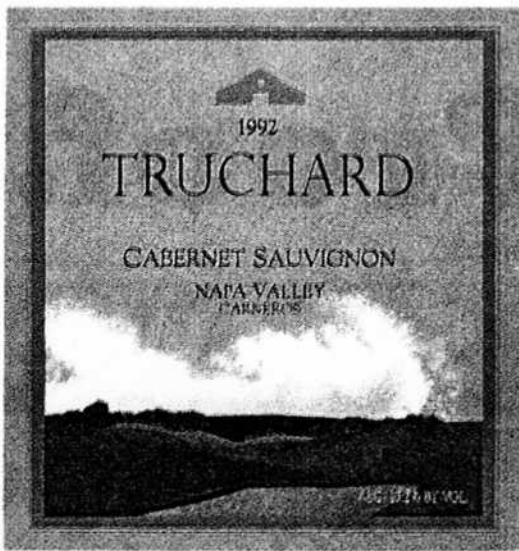
high in quality, as the following bottlings will attest.

CHARDONNAY

This grape leads the way with 48 percent of the district's plantings. *Cuvaision Reserve 1994* (\$28) was the most impressive rendition in my tastings, with fantastic richness and depth balanced out by bracing doses of acidity and toasty oak. *Beaulieu Vineyard Reserve 1994* (\$20) is also big and lush, though it manages to retain excellent finesse and definition. Softer and

more broadly textured is *Acacia Winery "Reserve" 1993* (\$29), a creamy, impressively integrated wine.

For a brighter, more focused style, try *Carmenet Winery Sangiacomo Vineyard 1993* (\$18), which blends spicy, toasty notes along with pineapple and butterscotch, or *Saintsbury 1994* (\$18), the best



Yet growth remained slow, and wineries did not spring up in earnest until the late 1970s. Carneros receives little rain, and the vines must struggle in thin, poor soils. Quality is high, but yields are too low to make anything less than premium bottlings, so it was not until the fine wine boom began 20 years ago that the area offered promising investment potential.

Today, with 6,200 acres being worked by 29 wineries and 51 growers, Carneros is one of America's most important sources for fine Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and sparkling wine. As a group, the wines are moderately expensive but consistently

chocolate, tobacco and blackberries. Cabernet Sauvignon ripens later than Merlot, but the northern section of Carneros is warmer due to diminished marine influence. *Truchard Vineyards 1992* (\$14) is attractively priced and perfectly ripe, with a full, fleshy texture and scents of toffee, chocolate and blackberry.

Finally, Carneros's long, cool growing season is great for sparkling wines, as proven by the elegant, restrained, impeccably clean *Domaine Carneros Brut 1991* (\$20). Fuller, stronger styles are also possible, as in *Acacia Winery Brut 1989* (\$32.50), with a gutsy, lees-y, toasty nose and flavors that explode on the palate.