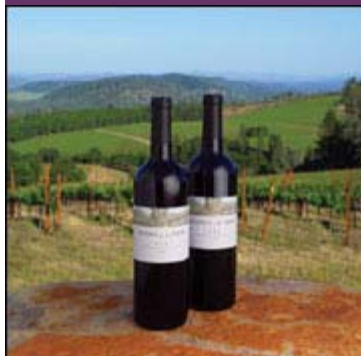


WINE NEWS

feature story



Most of Snows Lake Vineyard's exemplary fruit is sold to the likes of Cakebread, Rosenblum and others; owner George Myers made these limited Cabernets to prove a quality point.

Lake County refines its Reds

By *TIM TEICHGRAEBER*

After two decades of heavy investment and pioneering work by an infusion of ambitious winegrowers, Lake County - once better known for canoeing than cabernet - is re-launching itself, made over with more thoughtfully sited vineyards and state-of-the-art winemaking facilities. Although the just north-of-Napa region has enjoyed a solid reputation for Sauvignon Blanc for a few decades, it was also known for uneven Cabernet Sauvignon and other reds. New plantings coming on line in the high-altitude Red Hills of Lake County and High Valley AVAs are already producing some head-turning wines, especially Cabernet Sauvignon.

Grape growing in Lake County dates to the 1880s when the first commercial winery was developed there by David Voight. By 1920, there were some 10,000 acres under vine in the valley and hillsides surrounding Clear Lake. Then, during Prohibition, most of the vineyards were replaced with pear and walnut orchards, which, though they don't reliably produce bumper crops in the relatively infertile volcanic soils that dominate Lake County, are still a common sight.

In the late 1960s, vineyard plantings surged again, but that didn't mean that growers had gotten it right. Too often, grapes were planted in the wrong places; for example, cabernet was planted near the lake where it developed weedy, green flavors and tarnished the region's reputation. For example, the low-lying Guenoc Valley, at Lake County's southern end, is one area that many believe is less than ideal for planting many of the varieties that were started there.

These early missteps were corrected in the 1990s, when the potential of the high ridges bordering the lake was first explored. A new generation of expert growers discovered ideal conditions for cultivating red grapes in the well-drained, red volcanic soils of the area now known as the Red Hills of Lake County AVA, situated at the southwestern corner of Clear Lake, and in the High Valley AVA overlooking the lake's eastern shore.

Clear Lake, with 110 miles of shoreline, is the largest body of water located entirely within California. (Lake Tahoe, while slightly bigger and much deeper, straddles the California-Nevada border.) Clear Lake's comparatively shallower, warmer waters make it popular in the summer months with recreational bathers, boaters and fishermen. And while the lake is presently the county's bigger tourist draw, according to Jim Fetzer, that's poised to change.

After the Fetzer family sold its Mendocino County-based brand to Brown-Forman in 1992 for a reported \$80 million, Fetzer, one of California's earliest advocates of sustainable, organic and biodynamic viticulture, was eager to reinvest in winegrowing - his family's life's work. His prerequisites were finding a parcel of land suitable for both progressive biodynamic viticulture (natural farming techniques proscribed by Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner that disallow artificial pesticides or chemical fertilizers, and require following the lunar cycle to organically grow an array of plants and husband animals within the confines of a biodiverse estate), and ideal for hosting environmentally conscious wine tourists.

Eventually, he settled on a breathtaking, 163-acre lakefront parcel and established Ceàgo del Lago there in 2001. To date, 50 acres of Demeter-certified biodynamically farmed vineyards - in which sheep graze on cover crops - have been planted to (in roughly descending order) cabernet sauvignon, syrah, sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, malbec, cabernet franc and muscat canelli; with lakefront space dedicated to a few acres of lavender that is harvested and distilled for its essential oils. The diverse estate is centered around a Spanish-style hacienda winery, two guest casitas, a restaurant and event space (see "Ceàgo del Lago" box on page 43). Walking into the Spanish compound and hearing the piped-in bossa nova music, you might find yourself craving a margarita before your Sauvignon Blanc.

Lake County's lower areas are actually best known for Sauvignon Blanc, and Ceàgo, under the hand of winemaker Javier Tapa, turns out a nice one; its 2007 Del Lago Kathleen's Vineyard (\$16) is fresh and citrusy with a pleasing plumpness. A 2007 Del Lago Dijon Clones Chardonnay (\$20) offers full, generous flavors of apple and lemon curd nuanced with mineral and earth. The 2007 Muscat Canelli (\$24) is a moderately sweet, vintage-dated frizzante white with lime, peach and apricot flavors, 8 percent alcohol and 8 percent residual sugar that flies out of the tasting room; it enjoys a steady retail and restaurant following, too. "It's the perfect breakfast-in-bed wine," notes Fetzer's son Barney.

Although Ceàgo's lakefront locale is not typically viewed as an ideal location for red varieties, biodynamic farming practices, careful selection of rootstocks and clones, and Jim Fetzer's wealth of grapegrowing experience have done much to offset any climatic and geologic disadvantages. Ceàgo's inaugural 2005 red wine releases taste as promising as the whites (see "Tasting Bar," page 42), and are prime examples of how depth of experience among Lake County's modern-era winegrowers is improving and elevating Lake County reds.

Ceàgo del Lago is still in a growth phase, yet the postcard-perfect lakeside complex is exactly the type of winery destination that Lake County needed to begin drawing wine tourists north of Napa Valley.

Clear Lake, like Lake Tahoe, is a relatively high-altitude basin, sitting as it does at 1,326 feet above sea level. The whole region is lifted, too, because it is here in Lake County that the Mayacama and Vaca ranges that run parallel up through Napa Valley (on the west and east, respectively) merge. In fact, two tectonic plates, the Pacific and the North American, come together here as well: The former thrusts over the latter, which results in the area's bubbling sulfur springs and mountain lakes, and also a large, now-dormant volcano, Mt. Konocti, which, when active, was the source of the region's distinctive red soil and rich obsidian deposits.

Konocti was this region's Vesuvius, showering the terrain with inorganic soils and black pyroclastic glass deposits. Growers have reported running into car-size, solid blocks of the resilient stuff while planting new vineyards. This seemingly limitless supply of obsidian, ideal for fashioning razor-sharp arrowheads, made Lake County a virtual supply store for Native American hunters. Geologic convulsions still make Lake County a Disneyland of sorts for contemporary geologists.

The same geologic phenomena created the interlaced mountain ranges that ring Clear Lake, and make Lake County a difficult place to reach from neighboring Mendocino, Sonoma and Napa counties.

From any approach, one must traverse a winding road into the pretty valley that surrounds the placid lake. This same knot of mountains makes for an interesting mix of highland terroir, much of it sited between 1,500 and 3,000 feet in elevation with varied exposures and a common shared soil type: red, volcanic, poor in nutrients and exceptionally well drained.

Lake County's most exciting reds are now coming from the ridges that surround much of Clear Lake, especially on the southeast lakeside in the aforementioned Red Hills of Lake County AVA and northwest of the lake in the High Valley AVA. Both of these AVAs, which range in elevation between 1,500 and 3,000 feet, take advantage of milder daytime temperatures, intense sunlight and 40 degree day-to-night temperature swings. Lean mountain soils yield small berries that prove to be rich in color, flavor and tannin.

In past years, growers had dismissed Lake County, asserting that its less-coastally influenced summers are too hot to make quality wines, the region's high-altitude vineyards are actually a bit cooler than the hottest parts of Napa Valley, and the cabernet growing season is shorter than in Napa, but longer than that of Bordeaux.

Louis Martini, Beringer, Roumigièrre and Kendall-Jackson were, in that order, among the first of the better-known outside growers to plant vineyards in what has, since 2004, been recognized as the Red Hills of Lake

County AVA. Among a handful of others, these four were early to recognize that the comparatively affordable highland terrain had the potential to produce formidable Cabernet and Zinfandel. Validating his employer's investment, legendary winemaker Jed Steele, after leaving his Kendall-Jackson post in 1991, settled in Lake County to make wines from both local fruit and outside sources.

A wave of winegrowers followed, banking heavily on the region and building their brands largely from the Red Hills AVA. For virtually all of the key players, cabernet sauvignon has become the lead grape. One of Red Hills' most successful proponents is George Myers, a grower who owns Snows Lake Vineyard and bottles a small amount of commercial Cabernet. He points out that despite the imported experience now at work in Red Hills, the AVA's output is a ten-year-old work in progress, while Napa Valley has had 30 to 40 years of continuous improvement to its credit.

Myers grew up on his family's citrus and avocado ranch in Ojai before enrolling in the UC-Davis enology program and studying under Ann Noble

(Myers had the privilege of assisting his professor in developing her now-famous wine sensory analysis wheel that maps the range of wine aromas and flavors). Myers moved on to develop chardonnay and syrah vineyards in Clarksburg, near Lodi. He sold those vineyards in 1994 and began looking for his next project, which presented itself in Lake County's Red Hills.

He began acquiring land there - including an old Louis Martini ranch purchased in 1996 - gradually assembling the contiguous 2,300-acre Snows Lake ranch. Between 1996 and 2000, Myers undertook an ambitious planting program that focused on cabernet sauvignon. Today there are 808 acres under vine, almost 600 in cabernet sauvignon with the balance, again in roughly descending order, in syrah, zinfandel, cabernet franc, merlot, primitivo, barbera, malbec, petit verdot and tempranillo.

An impressive list of clients, including Cakebread, Diageo (for its Dynamit brand), Rosenblum and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars (the latter for its Hawk Crest second label), purchase fruit from Myers, who sensed from the outset that the best way to promote the Red Hills AVA and his Snows Lake Vineyard would be to craft a vineyard-designate wine. With the intent of associating the Lake County name with a great wine and simultaneously proving his vineyard's merits, Myers held back some of his best 2004 fruit for the production of two limited-production wines: Snows Lake One (pure cabernet sauvignon) and Snows Lake Two (a blend of cabernets sauvignon and franc), both priced at \$45 per bottle.

As advertised, each has since generated critical acclaim: the 2004 Snows Lake One earned a "Gold" at the Concours Mondial de Bruxelles and the 2005 a "Great Gold" award; the 2004 and 2005 vintages of Snows Lake Two both won prestigious "Double Gold" medals at the San Francisco International Wine Competition. Each wine displays the kind of deep black fruit found in Napa Cabs, but with a finesse and elegance that's more akin t

Bordeaux. It's a profile that doesn't have an equivalent in Alexander Valley or any of California's other prestigious Cab zones.

If Lake County can routinely deliver this caliber of Cabernet, it may become one of the finest Cabernet Sauvignon regions in the world. For now though, there is very little of the very best. "We want Snows Lake to go to 1,500 cases, but that's it," Myers says. His goal was simply to prove a point that Lake County can make world-class Cabernet. It's a strategy that worked, and now Myers is turning away potential buyers. "It feels good to be validated," he says.

Like Myers, Obsidian Ridge's Peter Molnar also comes from a grapegrowing family, albeit with roots in the pinot noir and chardonnay country of Carneros. Molnar had long admired the Cabernets of Napa Valley's Mayacamas Mountain range - Mt. Veeder, Spring Mountain and Diamond Mountain. "I started to wonder what's north of Mt. St. Helena," Molnar recalls. He followed his instincts north and bought a former walnut orchard in 1997, cleared it, and in 2000 began planting; in 2002, the Molna family partnered with winemaker Michael Terrien of Hanzell Vineyards. They now have 105 acres of mostly north-facing cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, petit verdot and syrah vineyards planted at elevations between 2,300 and 2,600 feet. Their first commercial vintage was 2002.

Echoing the Snows Lake model, the 2005 Obsidian Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon boasts a depth of black fruit, ample structure and finesse. It's a rich wine, but not clumsy or heavy. "When you deliver fruit here at 27 degrees Brix it's completely sound," Molnar says. "When you do that in Napa, the fruit has already begun to decay and shrivel."

"It's a collaborative effort up here, and we've pulled a lot of experts from Napa and elsewhere," Molnar notes. "Arguably, that combination of cooperation and expertise was Napa's road to success as well."

When Andy Beckstoffer went real estate shopping in the Red Hills in 1997, it was a vote of confidence for Lake County from one of Napa Valley's most esteemed growers. Beckstoffer wanted to expand his holdings and, after weighing an opportunity in Pope Valley (within the Napa Valley AVA), he invested instead in Lake County with the purchase of the 2,000-acre Red Hills ranch, originally Amber Knolls Orchard, which he renamed Amber Knolls Vineyard.

While the cachet of Pope Valley's right to use the Napa Valley AVA on a label was alluring, it was the potential of the soils along the Lake County ridge that sold him on Red Hills. Economy of scale was another advantage. "There was also the opportunity to purchase a larger contiguous property," Beckstoffer explains. By working a larger parcel of land, he could then justify hiring top vineyard managers and staff to live on site and manage the ranch.

While Beckstoffer sells most of his grapes to various clients for blending, including Schrader Cellars and Paul Hobbs, an Amber Knolls Cabernet is

produced by his son, Tuck, under the 75 Wine Co. label.

Madder Lake Vineyard, owned and operated by Spencer Roloson Vineyards, is another Red Hills property that sells the majority of its grapes to others, but reserves some of the best fruit for single vineyard Spencer Roloson bottlings.

"The way I perceive Madder Lake is as a branded vineyard like Bien Nacido," says Sam Spencer, whose 43 acres of mostly west-facing, high-altitude vineyards are sited between 1,650 and 2,250 feet. About 60 percent of the harvest is contracted for by wineries that include Copain, Merus and Turley.

He has met with critical success for both his Madder Lake Syrah and Tempranillo, but says the latter is in the greatest demand. "I get better pricing for it than [do growers in] Napa," Spencer says. "I bought the property to plant tempranillo here...the topography reminded me of Spain," Spencer explains.

As a nod to the area's red soils, Spencer borrowed Madder's name from a paint pigment made from madder root and used to glaze the vermilion tones of painters, like the Dutch Master Vermeer, with a vibrant ruby hue.

Across Clear Lake from the Red Hills AVA and to the north-northeast lies the High Valley AVA. As its name suggests, the elevations are lofty, running from a base of 1,800 feet with steeply pitched slopes of up to 30 degrees that can climb up to ridge lines that flirt with 3,000 feet. Exposures here are more varied than in Red Hills, but the dominant soil is the same red volcanic type found across the lake.

Clay Shannon of Shannon Ridge is one of High Valley's biggest players. The former director of vineyard operations for Sutter Home (he held the post from 1985 to 1993) says that cheap land was the least important reason he settled here in 1995. Rather, "it was the red dirt, and it's by far the best-drained soil you'll ever see," he enthuses. Shannon also recognized that the county, especially the highlands, was not as hot as it was reputed to be, and that by making good use of various exposures, elevations and microclimates, he could grow any number of grape varieties, including whites like roussanne and sauvignon blanc. "Lake County isn't really hot at all - it's warm," he says. "It's also dry, so we can grow great petite sirah and zinfandel."

Cabernet sauvignon also does well in High Valley, as does barbera; 1,500 cases of the latter is bottled by Shannon Ridge in a juicy style, so popular that it sells out within months of release. While some wineries complain that blended wines are a tough sell, Shannon Ridge's Wrangler Red, a layered, rich, everything-but-the-kitchen sink blend, is its bestselling wine.

After just a few years in the market, Shannon Ridge has reached 40,000 cases annually with plans to grow to 60,000 cases over the next couple of years.

"Our heart is in taking our grapes all the way to the bottle," Shannon notes.

The Shannon Ridge portfolio, priced between \$12 and \$20 per bottle and made in a very accessible style, enjoys national distribution. "The wines are really fruit driven, and there's not a lot of oak," Shannon explains. "Oak trees are for corks and for kids to climb." His Sauvignon Blanc embodies the house philosophy. For all the recent talk of reds, Bordeaux's star white grape remains a Lake County keystone and Shannon Ridge's mouthwatering 2007 Sauvignon Blanc (\$16) offers fresh aromas of melon, grass and grapefruit together with juicy, generous citrus and tropical fruit flavors.

Although Shannon is also crafting a few small-production reserve wines for the consumer who wants more oak and heavier bottles - and also just to see what heights the High Valley wines can reach - for the most part, he is committed to a populist approach. "I don't want to raise prices," he says. "We're normal people, and with gas prices and the economy what they are, consumers certainly don't need a price hike."

Jerry Brassfield is a High Valley contemporary of Shannon's whose Brassfield Estate also grows an eclectic assortment of grapes. He, too, is building a substantial brand based on estate-grown grapes rather than selling most of his fruit like many of their Red Hills peers. Although Brassfield has owned his 2,500-acre High Valley ranch for 35 years, he is a relative newcomer to grapes. In fact, it was his neighbor Clay Shannon who convinced him that winegrowing was the future of High Valley. "I bought [the ranch] thinking cattle and as just something to hold onto. We operated it as cattle ranch for 20 years and then kept it as a retreat," recalls Brassfield, whose family had long raised cattle, as well as peaches and almonds. "I've always been close to the earth through farming. My brother and I had a small Santa Cruz Mountains winery when we were young and got up to 10,000 cases. It was profitable, but we ran out of capital and sold it," he continues.

Fortified with investment capital from his extraordinarily successful nutritional food supplement business, GNLD, Brassfield took Shannon's cue and in 2001 began planting everything from cabernet sauvignon to merlot, pinot noir to petite sirah. Brassfield Estate has since blossomed to a 50,000-case-per-year brand with a portfolio of estate-bottled wines priced between \$15 and \$22 per bottle.

High Valley's Brassfield and Shannon intend to maintain this high quality-to-value ratio for as long as they can in an increasingly competitive market, which should swell their already loyal fan base. And although Lake County vintners have already scaled new heights, if more of them can replicate the world-class Cabernets already trickling out of the Red Hills AVA, the North Coast's newest wine frontier will enjoy even headier days in coming vintages.

Development in this promising locale has slowed a bit (mirroring the national real estate trend), but Obsidian Ridge's Peter Molnar believes that's

because everyone is just letting the first vintages sink in: "We've got enough planted - now let's see what we've got."

San Francisco-based guest contributor Tim Teichgraeber frequently writes for Decanter and the San Francisco Chronicle.

Tasting BAR

The Lake County reds that follow were tasted open by the author. Aromatic aspects are cited only when they stand out from the flavor profile, otherwise they should be considered consistent with the flavors and overall characteristics of the wine. Where noted, the wines were tasted twice. Scores are based on the BuyLine rating system.

Ceàgo del Lago, 2006 Syrah, Clear Lake - \$22: Ceàgo's first Syrah vintage offers pretty, fragrant rose, clove and boysenberry aromas and like flavors. Medium weight with good grip in the finish. Score: 87

Ceàgo del Lago, 2005 Cabernet Franc, Clear Lake - \$35: A very pleasant surprise from young vines. Well crafted with charming blueberry, wild strawberry and cassis aromas; fresh black fruit flavors; and balancing acidity in the finish. Complex and very drinkable. Score: 89

Obsidian Ridge, 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Hills of Lake County - \$30: Impressive right out of the box with enticing clove, currant, licorice and cassis aromatics; deep black fruit and spice flavors knitted with fine-grain tannins. A long, minerally finish keeps the wine bright and on point. (Taste twice with consistent results.) Score: 93

Rosenblum, 2005 Zinfandel, Snows Lake Vineyard, Red Hills of Lake County - \$35: Ripe and juicy in textbook, fruit-forward, Rosenblum style. Focused cherry, blackberry and black currant flavors accented by mild peppery notes and a kiss of sweet vanilla. Score: 89

Shannon Ridge, 2006 Wrangler Red, Lake County - \$18: A bargain-priced blend of cabernet, barbera, zinfandel, petit verdot, syrah and grenache. Seamlessly aromatic bouquet with delicious flavors of spicy black cherry, boysenberry, licorice, vanilla and spice. Deep, fruity and well structured to boot. Score: 90

Shannon Ridge, 2006 Syrah, Lake County - \$19: Bright aromas of cherry compote, boysenberry, vanilla and cinnamon; rich flavors of licorice, blackberry, raspberry and maraschino cherry imbued with perfectly balanced acidity. Sweet California fruit galore. Score: 87

Snows Lake, 2005 "One" Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Hills of Lake County - \$45: A big yet graceful wine with pretty aromas of mint, cassis and cherry; velvety and mouth-filling in a middle that's loaded with black fruit and terrific natural acidity. Its elegant profile is markedly Bordeaux-like. (Tasted twice with consistent results.) Score: 92

Snows Lake, 2005 "Two" Cabernet Sauvignon/ Cabernet Franc, Red Hills of Lake County - \$45: Fragrant, compact and layered, with generous blackberry, toast, tobacco and anise flavors that carry through the minerally finish; refined tannins and notable acidity typical of Red Hills wines. (Tasted twice with consistent results.) Score: 92

Spencer Roloson, 2005 Syrah, Madder Lake Vineyard, Lake County - \$34: Soft, plummy, nutty nose exudes a delicate, lifted menthol note; what seem like a little extra oak in the bouquet settles into the wine alongside slightly baked plum and black cherry fruit. Possesses a nice, taut, minerally mouth-feel through the finish, which shows a bit of alcohol. A good, plump, warm climate Syrah with plenty of mountain terroir. Score: 88

Spencer Roloson, 2005 Tempranillo, Madder Lake Vineyard, Lake County \$34: Smoky, slightly meaty aromas, along with deep, very ripe raspberry and cherry fruit. Tempranillo's great texture is in full effect, juicy and bright, yet also velvety soft with mineral notes, slightly drying tannins and nutty, vanilla-laced finish. One of California's finer Tempranillos to date. Score: 89 - TT

Lake County's lovely Ceàgo del Lago is more a lifestyle experience than a conventional tasting encounter. From its inception only a few years ago, Ceàgo has already become a place where visitors can taste wine, learn a little about biodynamic farming "and then have a big lunch," founder Jim Fetzer says. But his vision for the estate is even more elaborate.

Future plans include the addition of a 50-room hotel and spa, hillside residences and 50 more vacation casitas. With its convenient lake access, a group of six can fly in from the Bay Area by sea plane for a four-hour Lake County visit for about \$1,400. For this reason and more, Fetzer believes Lake County will be a great refuge for those tired of the madding crowds clogging Napa Valley's Route 29. "This place is really going to happen in the next three to five years," he predicts.

- TT

If You GO:

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