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# WINES & VINES

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## A Visit to Lake County's High Valley AVA

By Paul Franson

When people in the wine business think of Lake County, they usually think of a hot growing region, but one that produces excellent Sauvignon Blanc. If they're observant, they know that its new Red Hills AVA has the potential to produce superb Cabernet and other Bordeaux reds with much lower land costs than Napa or Sonoma.

Few, however know of the new High Valley appellation above the northeastern shore of Clear Lake, the large lake that gives the county its name.

Unless you fly over the area, or are specifically invited, you're unlikely to even be aware of the bucolic valley laying at 1,700 feet, surrounded by mountains reaching 3,000 feet. The valley floor is 600 feet higher than the lake, and its topography produces growing conditions unlike the rest of the county...

### Shannon Ridge Vineyards

Clay and Margarita Shannon own Shannon Vineyards, which contains some of the most dramatic sites in California. Planted on rolling deep red soils, some rise at almost 40% grade. Because the soil drains so well, however, there's no erosion.

The volcanic soils, steep ridges and constant cooling winds distinguish the vineyards. The vineyards line the mountain rims along the southeast edge of the High Valley AVA. At 2,200 feet, the Terre Vermeille vineyard looks over Clear Lake, which provides cooling winds during long summer days.

Clay Shannon's vines are mostly red varieties, including unusual varieties plus Petite Sirah. He has propagated buds from 15 Zinfandel vines brought to the area in 1875, and also has Sauvignon Blanc on north-facing slopes.

Shannon gets some of the highest prices in Lake County, at \$2,200 per ton, but also makes a small amount of wine under his own name. The winery has opened a tasting room in an old school on Highway 20 in Clearlake Oaks. The wines are made by Marco DeGiulio at Cardinale and Livingston-Moffett in Napa Valley.

The Shannons' first vineyard was Terre Vermeille, a cinder cone just south of Round Mountain. Along one side lie the red soils from the volcanic flows and along the other, weathered-grey volcanic ash and loams. These vineyards hang on steep west- and north-facing slopes. The first were planted in 1995 with Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Zinfandel, and more recently, they've added Petite Verdot, Barbera, Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

Over the ridge from Terre Vermeille, on a steep south-facing slope, is the Morine Ranch, dropping precipitously down toward Clear Lake on a 38-40% pitch. Here, Rhône varieties are planted. Two small vineyards connect Terre Vermeille with the Caldwell Ranch. First is La Sierra, a 2.5-acre vineyard planted in Petite Sirah, Cabernet Franc, Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon and the leased Ogulin Vineyard, with 19 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon. These two vineyards are at an elevation of approximately 2,200 feet and face north and south. The 360-acre Caldwell Ranch includes 70 to 80 acres of vineyards including the impossibly steep Petite Sirah vineyard, plus Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Tempranillo, Zinfandel, Mourvèdre and Sauvignon Blanc.