Gaining Ground

LAKE COUNTY'S NEW WEBSITE OFFERS AN EDUCATIONAL FOCUS FOR THIS SIGNIFICANT WINE REGION

by Diane Denham / photos by Nathan DeHart

PHOTO: MIGUEL VINCENTE

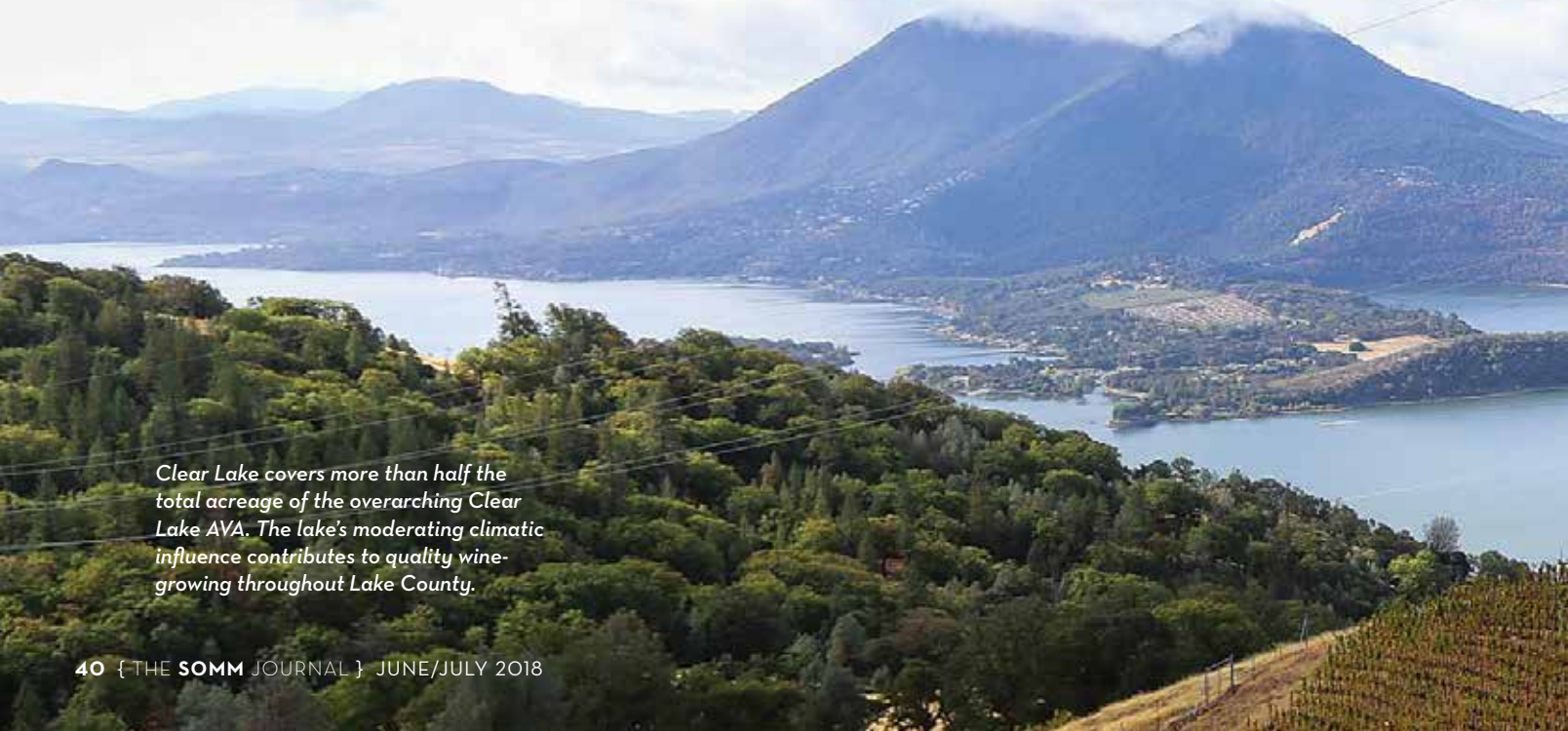
Master Sommelier Bob Bath, a Lake County enthusiast, has led trade tastings for the region and also helped gather information for its new website.

AS MEMBERS OF the wine industry, we're all familiar with Lake County's reputation as one of Northern California's emerging wine regions. In regards to the more than 250 million tourists visiting California every year, however, it's safe to bet most of them have never heard of Lake County.

That's a pity. While the county's wines have a reputation for value, they've garnered little widespread notoriety compared to the more celebrated wines of Napa and Sonoma. Master Sommelier Bob Bath, though, is certain that will soon change. A Lake County enthusiast, Bath knows the region intimately considering his parents owned a home near Lower Lake for 20 years. "There are so many things going for Lake County terroir-wise that it's only a matter of time before this region will be producing world-class wines in addition to great value wines," he explains.

Bath, who has worked with the region to gather important information for its new website, says that the timing is right for its launch. Found at *lakecountywines.org*, the site features exhaustive information on all things Lake County in one easily accessible location. It also contains many of the fascinating factoids Bath assembled for a separate, education-focused presentation for the trade. Here are just a few examples:

- The county encompasses California's largest natural lake, Clear Lake, which is also quite likely the oldest lake in North America. It's estimated to be 2.5 million years old, but its status as a top destination for bass fishermen is all but solidified.



Clear Lake covers more than half the total acreage of the overarching Clear Lake AVA. The lake's moderating climatic influence contributes to quality wine-growing throughout Lake County.

- The county has had the cleanest air in California for more than 20 years.
- More than 200 North Coast wineries use Lake County grapes.
- Most of Lake County's 9,500 vineyard acres are planted higher than 1,300 feet above sea level along the valley floors and slopes of one of the three mountain ranges that rim the region: the Mayacamas to the west; the Vaca Mountains to the southeast; and the Mendocino Range to the north.
- Due to the elevation and the clean air, Lake County fruit receives up to 10 percent more ultraviolet exposure than neighboring sea-level valleys. Increased UV produces grapes with thicker skins, which results in intense wines with phenolically-ripe tannins.
- The cold winters and dry growing conditions decrease incidents of disease, which reduces the need for chemical pesticides and fungicides. Lake County has one of the lowest rates of pesticide use in California.
- Soils in the region's seven recognized AVAs run the gamut from serpentine (not ideal for vines) to volcanic, sandstone, and alluvial.
- Clear Lake covers more than half the total acreage of the overarching Clear Lake AVA. The lake's moderating climatic influence contributes to quality winegrowing throughout the region.
- The combination of diverse soils, elevation, and climatic conditions means 50 different grape varieties thrive somewhere in the county. Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon are the most widely planted in the region.

A barn on the property of Rooster Vineyard displays a "quilt" painting that's part of the Lake County Quilt Trail, the first of its kind in California.

***Winemaker Matt Hughes pours at a recent SOMM Camp event in Lake County. The event was presented by the Lake County Winegrape Commission in collaboration with* The SOMM Journal.**

When Bath explains further why he's such a fan of Lake County—and what wine buyers can use as key takeaways—he cites the varietal purity of the wines; their balance, exhibited by their "abundant fruit, but not at the expense of acidity"; and "great value."

He's also impressed by the "thoughtful winemaking" of the local producers, explaining that they're "not overdoing the winemaking so that the wines speak of being from 'somewhere' rather than from 'someone.'" "There's a lack of ego and open-mindedness here. Producers believe in the region, but they're not egotistical about it," he adds. "They're also open to feedback and experimentation." As for which of the AVAs might be the ones to watch, Bath says people should "keep an eye on the Red Hills and High Valley appellations."

Although Lake County's first vineyards were planted in 1854, its vineyard plantings today are miniscule compared to Napa and Sonoma: Lake County's 9,500 acres to Napa's 45,000 and Sonoma's 65,000. "There's plenty of room to grow," Bath says. He's also excited about the new website, which he sees as a superb resource for both consumers interested in wine tourism and members of the wine trade looking to expand their knowledge. "The region is getting more attention now and there's so much to talk about from a terroir standpoint," he continues. "A great website is the perfect venue for communicating all of that and hopefully serving as an inspiration to visit this incredible region." SJ

For more information, visit lakecountywines.org.