

# CALIFORNIA'S OTHER CABS

Napa may get all the plaudits, but for true Cabernet lovers, Sonoma and Lake County increasingly have as much to offer, says **LINDA MURPHY**

**M**ention California Cabernet, and we think Napa Valley. Napa long ago established itself as the no1 Cabernet Sauvignon-producing region in America, based on the quality of its wines, its terroirs, the image created by Robert Mondavi and burnished by Napa's solidly united vintners, and its improbable victory at the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting.

But can it really be that in a state of 424,000sq km, only a tiny 2,000sq km enclave east of the Mayacamas Mountains (of which only 174sq km is planted to vines, making just 4% of the state's wine) can make world-class Cabernet? And how is it that this one 80km-long mountain range serves Napa winemakers so well, yet doesn't bestow its Cabernet-growing goodness elsewhere – on Sonoma County on its

western flank, nor Lake County to the north? The answer is that it does, though you'd be hard pressed to know it.

'The Mayacamas Mountains are the axis for Cabernet Sauvignon in northern California,' says longtime grower Andy Beckstoffer, who owns significant vineyard land in Napa, Lake and Mendocino counties.

Three of Napa's five mountain appellations – Diamond Mountain District, Spring Mountain and Mount Veeder – are nestled in the eastern side of the Mayacamas, while its most historical winegrowing areas – Oakville, Rutherford

**Below: the Alexander Mountain Estate in Sonoma's Alexander Valley is planted at varying elevations, some topping 700m. The resulting wines more than match Napa's quality, says Murphy**





and Yountville – benefit from the poor volcanic mountain soils that have washed down onto the benches above the valley floor. Sonoma County and one specific part of Lake County (the Red Hills) have similar soils, climates and exposures as the Napa side of the Mayacamas, yet winemakers have not attacked the mountain with the same energy and viticultural determination that Napa has. Until now.

Sonoma County and its prime regions for Cabernet – Sonoma Valley, in the southern end of the Mayacamas; Alexander Valley, in the northeastern part of the county; and Knights Valley, the long, narrow gap between Alexander Valley and Calistoga in northern Napa Valley – all have some influence from the Mayacamas. But it's the high-altitude vineyards planted above the fog line, where summer temperatures can be 5°C to 10°C lower than the valley floor, and which get two to three hours more daily sunlight, that can grow superior Cabernet in Sonoma and Lake.

Steve Pride runs Pride Mountain Vineyards at 640m, atop Spring Mountain in the Mayacamas. He has a PhD in geophysics, and is both a Napa and Sonoma guy, since his vineyards straddle both counties. He has wines labelled Sonoma County, others as Napa Valley, and some as Sonoma/Napa blends, yet all the Cabernet grapes are from his estate.

'The Sonoma side of the Mayacamas has a greater southern exposure and therefore an enhanced exposure to sunlight,' Pride says. 'So if both sides of the county line had equal areas planted along the length of the range, the Sonoma side would produce, on average, a more concentrated, rich Cabernet due to its greater capacity for ripeness. For whatever reason, state parks and other access issues, the Napa side has been more heavily planted.

But our best exposures at Pride Mountain face south, on the Sonoma side of the county line.

Pride adds that it is important to distinguish between mountain and valley Cabernet, whether in Sonoma or Napa. 'Grapes picked at similar ripeness levels from valley and mountain settings give wines with different character,' he says. 'Mountain Cabs have more structure and a greater chance of showing a cedary, tobacco, tar and underbrush character, in addition to the ripe cassis. Cabernets from a valley setting, such as around Oakville, have more blackberry liqueur and a softer, more elegant finish. Comparing a To Kalon (Oakville) Cab to a Cab from our mountain property is like comparing apples and oranges. Neither one is better or worse than the other; they are just different, and that makes the world of California Cabernet a better and more interesting place.

'If I were looking to expand our vineyards – and I'm not – due to global warming, I'd look more carefully at the Sonoma sites. The sites farther inland might get too warm in the future.'

Daniel 'Dr Dirt' Roberts, proprietor of the consultancy Integrated Winegrowing in Sonoma County, has worked with Sterling Vineyards in Napa Valley, Helen Turley in Sonoma, and Jess Jackson in both regions, in planting mountain vineyards. 'It's not just Napa that produces great Cabernet. Sonoma does too,' Roberts says. 'Many of Napa's Cabs have lost their definition. To my taste, there's a lot of bad, one-dimensional Cab coming out of Napa; they all taste alike and cost too much. Sonoma offers more diversity, and there are many good sites for Cab. What's lagging behind there is viticulture. For too many growers and winemakers vines are pruned for quantity, not quality. That's changing, but slowly.' ➤

## WINE BY NUMBERS

**Cabernet Sauvignon planted (hectares)**  
**Average grape price per US ton (907kg)**

<b>Napa</b>	7,703ha / \$4,278 (£2,724)
<b>Sonoma</b>	4,650ha / \$2,200 (£1,400)
<b>Lake County</b>	1,275ha / \$1,436 (£914)







Above: Jill Davis of Lambert Bridge Winery in Dry Creek Valley, just one of Sonoma's leading AVAs (left) for Cabernet

where vines now grow. After Prohibition, demand for wine soared, and farmers ripped out their orchards and planted vineyards. But the profits take time to accumulate. Meanwhile, many of Napa's winemaking pioneers – Warren Winiarski at Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Jack and Jamie Davies at Schramsberg and Jim Barrett at Chateau Montelena – made their money elsewhere, and relocated to Napa to make wine, pouring huge sums into their passion. They never had to mess with apples.

Monte Rosso Vineyard, next to Lambert Bridge's new vineyard site, was planted in 1890, mostly to Zinfandel, and was bought by Louis M Martini in 1938. He added Cabernet to the vineyard that year, and today Monte Rosso is known for its crimson volcanic soils, 305m perch overlooking Sonoma Valley, and its distinctive style of Cabernet (see p48). The Louis Martini winery in Napa Valley (now owned by E&J Gallo), and Sbragia Family Vineyards and Arrowood Vineyards & Winery in Sonoma are among the wineries that bottle Monte Rosso Cabs, and the vineyard's voice shouts loud and clear in the glass, with warm, rich cherry/berry flavours, dried fruits, exotic spice, graphite and strong yet supple tannins. If California had a vineyard classification system, Monte Rosso would be a grand cru.

Jess Jackson's Alexander Mountain Estate in Alexander Valley would qualify too. A 2,065ha property on Black Mountain, planted to 724ha of vines, it has 400 different blocks, set on volcanic peaks, ridges and terraces, ranging in elevation from 137m to 732m. Most of the grapes go to Jackson's Stonestreet brand, made by South African expat Graham Weerts. The best Stonestreet Cabernets, Christopher's Vineyard (see p48) and Black Cougar Ridge, are stunners – and Napa-like expensive.

Good valley-floor Cabs are made in Sonoma, too, yet the hillsides and mountains of the Mayacamas produce the most layered, structured wines, with earthy mineral notes that are missing from valley grapes. Sonoma also makes thin, green, muddy Cabernets, along with some good-value wines between \$18 and \$25 (£12 and £16). The excitement is in knowing that Sonoma can do better, if it wants to. But there are hurdles.

Perhaps its biggest barrier is that Sonoma is more known for its Zinfandel, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Says Pride Mountain winemaker Sally Johnson: 'Many wineries don't see the logic in focusing their energies on developing a strong Cabernet programme, when so many other varieties produce incredible wines. With Sonoma County, there is never a simple answer to any question, since it is such a wonderfully diverse place.'

The sheer size of Sonoma County – more than 405,000ha – has made it vital for its appellational groups, such as Russian River Valley Winegrowers and Sonoma Valley Vintners &

An example of the change, he says, is Jill Davis. Davis, who made Napa Valley Cabernets for Beringer and William Hill before joining Lambert Bridge Winery in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley, is overseeing the planting of a Cabernet vineyard on a remote, mountainous ledge of Sonoma Valley, near the famed Monte Rosso Vineyard. The Lambert Bridge owners hired her in 2006 to make Cabernet an important part of the previously Merlot-focused programme. She's done just that, and rapidly, combining purchased grapes with those from Lambert Bridge's northern Santa Rosa vineyard into two beautiful 2006 Cabernets – the Sonoma County (see p48) and a Limited Selection.

Davis can hardly wait to get the new Sonoma Valley vineyard going. 'It has everything a great Cab vineyard should have: volcanic rock, well-drained soils and a southwest exposure,' she says. 'At 335m, it's above the fog line, with cooling breezes and a small diurnal swing. There are superb sites in Sonoma, but you have to work harder than in the other (Napa) valley. Look at last year's grape prices: Napa's top price paid for one ton (907kg) of Cabernet grapes was \$27,000 (£17,200); Sonoma's top price was \$6,454 (£4,113). It's more than a matter of choosing to do it right; you have to have the financial means to do it. It takes intestinal fortitude, and you can't take shortcuts.'

## Sonoma County: diversity

Many Sonoma growers, though, are farmers first and vigneron second, growing the crops that make the most financial sense. Apples, walnuts, plums and hops were once planted on land



Growers, to market their own wines, and not necessarily the whole of Sonoma County. Critics and those in the wine trade have often dismissed Sonoma Cabernet, making exceptions for a handful of high-end wines. Last year, Master Sommelier Evan Goldstein held a blind tasting, comparing high-altitude 2005 Cabernets from Sonoma and Napa. 'The differences were not at all obvious,' Goldstein says. 'Some of the Napa wines had harder, grittier tannins, but the quality of winemaking and viticultural excellence in all the wines made the tasters' ability to distinguish geography far hazier than they thought it would be. Some of the Sonoma wines had more texture, while the Napa wines seemed a bit leaner and grittier with more new oak in a case or two. The tasting showed how far Sonoma's better Cabernets have come.'

## Lake County: future promise

If Sonoma is a work in progress, Lake County's Red Hills, southwest of Clear Lake, is still taking baby steps toward becoming a quality Cabernet region. Lake County is where Jess Jackson got his start, planting the vineyard that became Kendall-Jackson. His winemaker, Jed Steele, started his own company, Steele Wines, in Lake County after leaving K-J and has been a fixture since. Napa producers such as Cakebread Cellars, Hess Collection, Schrader Cellars and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars have purchased Lake County grapes, underscoring the fact that 85% of Lake's grapes are shipped to other regions, often to become swallowed up in generic blends.



Above: the view from the top of the Mayacamas Mountains, looking over Lake County, quietly making a name for its Cabs

Yet in the last decade, Napa's Beckstoffer and Beringer have staked a claim in Lake County, as has Sonoma's Robledo Family. A handful of quality-focused Red Hills producers has emerged, among them Obsidian Ridge Vineyard, Snobs Lake Vineyards and 75 Wine Co, owned by Andy Beckstoffer's son, Tuck. This area was part of Napa County in the late 1800s, when Lake County had more than 2,830ha of wine grapes. During Prohibition, vines were replaced by crops, and only since 2000 have vineyards become fashionable and profitable, with Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc the darlings.

## WISH LIST: MURPHY'S TOP SONOMA AND LAKE COUNTY CABERNETS

In addition to being largely defined by the Mayacamas, Sonoma County and Lake County wines share another trait with those from Napa: lack of availability in the UK. The financials simply don't pencil out for most Californian wineries in price-conscious Britain, and limited production of their best wines restricts export efforts – though a number send their wines to more lucrative European markets and to Asia.

The US consumer's trade-down to lower-priced wines might encourage more wineries to export to the UK in future. In the meantime, US prices and stockists are included for our US readers.

**Lambert Bridge, Sonoma County 2006** (19pts/20) ★★★★★  
Balanced and complex, with lifted rose, mineral and earth nose. Pure and ripe cassis and black cherry fruit, spice, fine-grained tannins and a generous, mouthwatering close. Graceful and refined. From 2010. **N/A UK. \$80;** [www.lambertbridge.com](http://www.lambertbridge.com)



**Stonestreet, Christopher's Vineyard, Alexander Valley 2006** (18.5) ★★★★★  
Dense, opulent, exotic, wild blackberry fruit and Asian spice. Layered streaks of black chocolate, minerals and tobacco. Grippy tannins and brisk acidity. Will age well. From 2012. **N/A UK. \$100;** [www.stonestreetwines.com](http://www.stonestreetwines.com)

**Stuhlmuller Vineyards, Reserve, Alexander Valley 2006** (18.5) ★★★★★  
Violet and blackberry nose, rich yet balanced and succulent, with focused black and blue fruit and hints of loam and spice. Solid structure. From 2010. **N/A UK. \$65;** [www.stuhlmullerwinery.com](http://www.stuhlmullerwinery.com), Napa Valley Winery Exchange (CA)

**Lancaster Estate, Sophie's Hillside Cuvee, Alexander Valley 2007** (17.5) ★★★★★  
Energetic and juicy, with redcurrant, raspberry and vanilla notes. Supple tannins

and a fresh, lingering finish. Elegant, with superb balance. From 2010. **N/A UK. \$48;** [www.lancasterestate.com](http://www.lancasterestate.com)



**Louis M Martini, Monte Rosso Vineyard, Sonoma Valley** (17.5) ★★★★★  
Flower, strawberry jam and black tea nose. Berry/ cherry palate is rich, warm and spicy, with minerals, sturdy tannins and refreshing acidity. Not hot, despite 15.2% alcohol. Ageworthy. From 2010. **N/A UK. \$85;** [www.louismartini.com](http://www.louismartini.com), Saratoga Wine Exchange (NY), Pop's Wines (NY)

**Pellegrini Family Vineyards, Cloverdale Ranch, Alexander Valley 2006** (17.5) ★★★★★  
Full and savoury, with bright red fruit, olive, leafy herbs, cedar and tobacco. Chalky texture and a dry, focused finish. Complex, and fine value. From 2010. **N/A UK. \$28;** [www.pellegrinisonoma.com](http://www.pellegrinisonoma.com), Crown Wine & Spirits (FL), Du Vin Wines (CA)

**Dehlinger, Russian River Valley 2006** (17) ★★★★★  
Surprisingly classic Cabernet character, considering its chilly provenance. Lavender, cedar, earth and cassis nose leads to a juicy, focused palate of blackberry, cherry and vanilla. Brisk and nervy, with supple tannins. From 2010. **N/A UK. \$50;** [www.dehlingerwinery.com](http://www.dehlingerwinery.com), Benchmark Wine Group (CA)

**Obsidian Ridge, Red Hills, Lake County 2006** (17) ★★★★★  
Chewy yet ripe tannins. Plump black cherry and plum fruit is rich yet not overripe. Lively, with crunchy acidity and minerality. Well integrated. From 2010. **N/A UK. \$28;** [www.tricyclewineco.com](http://www.tricyclewineco.com), Wine House (CA), Cuvee Cellars (IL), Bi Rite (NJ)



**Sbragia Family Vineyards, Andolsen Vineyard, Dry Creek Valley 2006** (17) ★★★★★  
Combines herbs, forest floor and mineral complexity with



## NON-NAPA CABERNETS

Most of the soils in the Red Hills are volcanic (spewed by Mt Konocti, a part of the Mayacamas chain) and have an astonishingly high obsidian content. On a sunny day at Obsidian Ridge, planted at 700m to 810m, you are nearly blinded by the reflections off the black shards that litter the site and cut up tractor tires.

'The ultraviolet light here is 50% higher here than in Napa, and it ripens grapes quicker and sets the stage for flavour development at the top of the hillside, and tannic structure at the bottom,' explains Peter Molnar, a Carneros grapegrower who planted Obsidian Ridge in 2000. 'We have half the humidity of Napa, so there is no disease pressure. The soils have little organic growth and no water retention, so there is no competition with other plants. The vines are naturally low-vigour, so there is no need to manage the canopy.' Many parts of Lake County can top 38°C, yet the Red Hills are cooled by ocean breezes and the influence of Clear Lake, dropping temperatures by as much as 10°C from day to night.

Beckstoffer, who owns some of Napa Valley's finest vineyards, in addition to his Amber Knolls and Crimson Ridge vineyards in the Red Hills, says, 'When I got here (in 1997), Lake County wasn't quality or environmentally oriented, and most of the grapes were being sold to producers in other regions. But we're finding the sweet spots, and we'll find more as the region develops.' Watch this space... **D**

*Linda Murphy is Decanter's US West Coast correspondent*

dense, ripe, concentrated black fruit. Brawny and tight now, it should blossom with cellaring. From 2012. **N/A UK; \$35 www.sbragia.com, Wine Library (NJ), K&L Wine Merchants (CA), PrimoVino (CO)**

**Sebastiani, Cherryblock, Sonoma Valley 2006** (17) ★★★★★

Rich, lush and mouthfilling, yet elegant. Ripe red and black fruit, nicely oaked, with hints of vanilla and chocolate. Smooth tannins and fresh acidity. Moderate alcohol at 14.1%. From 2010. **£45; BWC**

**Ferrari Carano, Alexander Valley 2006** (16.5) ★★★★★

Vivid black fruit on the nose and palate. Rich and juicy, with notes of cocoa, vanilla and sandalwood. Velvety tannins, with a moderate acid finish. From 2010. **£20; VCL**

**Kendall-Jackson, Highland Estates, Hawkeye Mountain, Alexander Valley 2005** (16.5) ★★★★★

Concentrated and muscular, with cassis, plum, graphite

and chocolate notes. Firm tannins need time, yet it's fresh and focused. From 2011. **£35; CkO, Sml**

**75 Wine Co, Amber Knolls Vineyard, Red Hills, Lake County 2006** (16.5) ★★★★★

Vibrant black and blue fruit, with touches of cedar and dark chocolate. A juicy style to enjoy within five years, with polished tannins and a long finish. From 2010. **N/A UK; \$22 www.75wine.com, BevMo (CA), Young's Market (CA)**



**Snows Lake Vineyard, One, Red Hills, Lake County 2005** (16.5) ★★★★★

Get past the oaky nose for some true Cal Cab flavours of cassis, herbs, forest floor and cedar notes. Tight and tannic now, it should open with bottle age. From 2011.

**N/A UK; \$45 www.snowslakevineyard.com**

*For full details of UK stockists, see page 91*

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