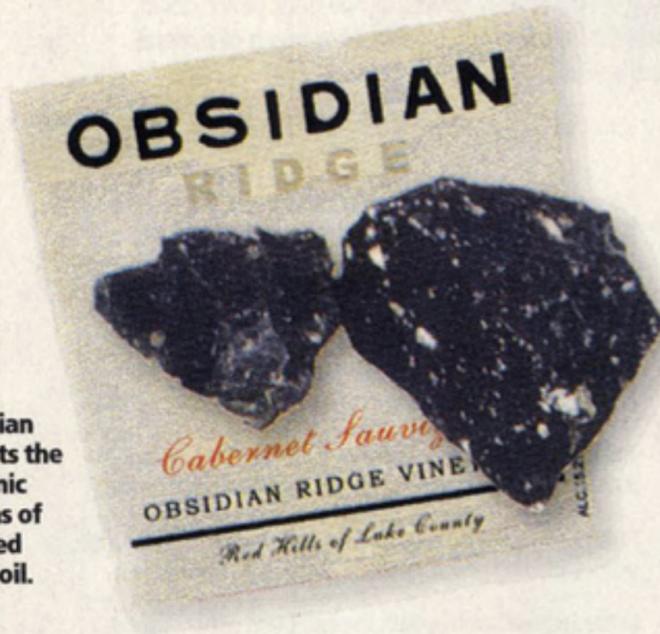


Food & Wine

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Obsidian reflects the volcanic origins of the Red Hills soil.

Wine *that* Rocks



Peter Molnar is producing notable cabernet sauvignons from his Obsidian Ridge Vineyard in the Red Hills appellation southwest of Clear Lake.

Risk taker Peter Molnar growing vines amid the obsidian, helping to build new Red Hills appellation

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March 30, 2005

By VIRGINIE BOONE THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Peter Molnar is a risk taker. An intensely focused guy only in his mid-30s, he's already six years into taking a big chance on a little known, newly designated appellation in Lake County known as Red Hills.

"Lake County has a certain stigma," said Molnar. "But the fact that there's been so much new planting in Red Hills and a lot of it's done well and has the potential for good quality, the image could change rapidly."

When Molnar bought his Lake County land, "there were no grapes here, really, of any volume. And then suddenly boom, it got planted, and boom, the (wines are) all going to hit the market at the same time."

Those wines include vintages by big-name Napa producers like Sterling Vineyards and Beaulieu Vineyards, which have started to use Molnar's Red Hills grapes in some of their wines.

Molnar's own tiny label, Obsidian Ridge, has just released some 500 cases of 2003 cabernet sauvignon and fewer than 200 cases of syrah. Obsidian Ridge retails for about \$25 a bottle, what Dan Dawson of Napa's Back Room Wines calls "a great big mouthful of flavor for a nice price."

Molnar wasn't the first in his family to have such vision. Back in 1973, when his father bought 100 acres of dairy cattle land that he would turn into Poseidon's Vineyard (because of how close it was to the bay) in Carneros, the appellation was 10 years away from official designation, and well under 1,000 acres of grapevines were planted.

An immigrant from Hungary, Molnar senior was making his living selling pension plans at the time. He paid \$3,500 an acre.

In contrast, Napa County as a whole had 20,000 acres planted, mostly to cabernet sauvignon -- the last grape one would plant in foggy, wind-swept Carneros, clearly better suited for pinot noir and chardonnay. But the elder Molnar's bet ended up being a good one.

So much so that by his son's time, buying land anywhere in Napa, including Carneros, was out of the question, with prices averaging in the hundreds of thousands of dollars per

acre. Still, Molnar sensed that the key to wealth and happiness in California, particularly in the wine business, continued to be land. So he set out to find his own version of Carneros.

Driving all over the state, he found his instincts and imagination eventually led him to Lake County, to an area southwest of Clear Lake on either side of Red Hills Road.

The red volcanic soils of Red Hills had most recently been used to dry-farm walnuts, a low-margin business no longer in much favor.

Unknown potential

Little was known about Red Hills' potential in 1998, when Molnar first laid eyes on a piece of hillside property south of Red Hills Road.

"This is all a 20-year experiment," he said. "At the time that we planted there wasn't much wine in the bottle (from Red Hills), so we went on hearsay."

The 112-acre site -- an old walnut orchard owned by a fellow named Eli Wilson -- rose to 2,640 feet and was covered in chunks of shiny black obsidian, some as big as boulders.

"The main thing about the obsidian is the drainage; the soil is really balanced. You would think it's totally impoverished but it's not," Molnar said, adding that its effect on the wine is yet unknown.

"There's definitely a certain amount of reflective and refracted heat going on and light coming off (the obsidian). How that absorbs heat and releases in the evening, we're going to learn."

Wilson had bought the property in the 1950s from Pappy Waldorf, the famed UC football coach, for about \$50,000. When Molnar finalized his own deal four decades later, it cost less than \$5,000 an acre, not a whole lot more than his father had paid in Carneros back in 1973.

But the area has since taken off, with big-name growers such as Andy Beckstoffer staking their own claims. Beckstoffer now has hundreds of acres planted to or planned for cabernet.

The price per acre in Red Hills now averages \$35,000.

Long haul

Despite the rise, Molnar is committed to the long haul. His goal: to grow premium red wine grapes, sell enough of them to Napa- and Sonoma-based wineries to make a living and produce a bit of wine of his own.

"When I came up here and was looking around, I thought to myself, what's the difference between this and Howell Mountain and Spring Mountain and Mount Veeder, except like 12 miles as the crow flies," Molnar said. "I'm trying to offer wineries North Coast hillside fruit at approachable prices."

Howell Mountain, Spring Mountain and Mount Veeder are Napa Valley appellations known for growing killer hillside cabernet sauvignon -- among the most expensive grapes in the world.

"Somebody like Sterling or BV, any of those larger wineries, will say, 'We're putting out a Napa Valley cab or North Coast cab at \$30, we can't pay \$5,000 a ton for grapes,'" Molnar explained.

"Those guys have the resources and the confidence to say, 'If it works, we'll use it,'" he said. "The people who come up and use fruit here are either the bold or the big, so far. But that's how it always works."

Along with Sterling and BV, Molnar's buyers include Kendall-Jackson, Stag's Leap Hawk Crest and Gott Wines.

"Peter is what sold me on the fruit," said Sarah Gott of Gott Wines. "It wasn't the area that sold me, it was more about who he was and what he believed in. I knew he was dedicated to quality and he had done this incredible research and gone to the nth degree."

Gott added that it helps to know that Molnar himself is producing wine under his own label using his own grapes, a test of faith in his vineyard.

"They're building their reputation on it," she said. "So they're more aware of what the vineyard is and what it takes. It's that next step."

Molnar's business partner and the winemaker for Obsidian Ridge is good friend Michael Terrien, who also handles full-time winemaking duties for Hanzell Vineyards in Sonoma.

"We think we can produce a wine that's competitive in quality to a hillside Napa wine," Terrien said. "And you have other players here who are pretty confident, that have made a big bet that Red Hills has the right ingredients to make good wine."

Like his father before him, Molnar clearly has the ability to sense potential.

"I don't ever want to say we'll be as good as (Napa) because that's not really the goal," Molnar said. "I hope one day we'll be as well recognized, but (Red Hills) will be its own flavor and style and distinction. It'll take years for that to develop in the popular consciousness, but it'll happen."

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