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Lake County echoes Napa's great soils

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Tim Teichgraber, SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

How do you get from Napa Valley to Lake County? Just follow the Mayacamas Mountains - and the smart money.

Experienced Napa growers have been flocking to the region north of Napa in search of prime Cabernet Sauvignon-growing conditions at a much cheaper price. Since 1997 the number of wineries in Lake County has increased from four to 32, at least doubling in the past four years. Total vineyard plantings have gone from 5,000 acres to 8,800 acres – up by almost 80 percent. With quality high and cost low, you will be seeing more wines carrying the Lake County name.

Most of the new development has taken place in two appellations on steep mountain hillsides from 2,000 to 3,000 feet elevation: Red Hills of Lake County and High Valley.

"The wines coming out of Lake County and Red Hills are punching above their weight class, and in this economy there's more attention to that," says Peter Molnar of Obsidian Ridge.



Obsidian Ridge's Peter Molnar (center) with his brother, Arpad (left), and winemaker Alex Beloz walk among Cabernet vines. Photo: Lianne Milton / Special to The Chronicle

Obsidian Ridge is a benchmark Red Hills Cabernet. Even in last year's morbid economic conditions, his sales were up 70 percent to 5,500 cases without having to drop the price of his \$30 Cabernet, which delivers the black fruit, structure and complexity of a Napa mountain Cabernet at a more affordable price.

The whole county is well above sea level; Clear Lake, its lowest place, sits at 1,400 feet. But most new plantings are at higher elevations in the two appellations. Red Hills, designated in 2004, is situated in the Mayacamas range southwest of Clear Lake, while High Valley, official since 2005, is in hills that tower over the lake's eastern shore. Now that these vineyards are maturing, they are producing the best wines the county has ever made, from first-rate Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc to Rhône varieties like Syrah and Roussanne. Even Tempranillo is gaining in popularity.

Snows lake vineyard

The county's largest new development is the 800-acre Snows Lake Vineyard, planted 10 years ago in the Red Hills area. Farmed by Napa veterans, Snows Lake sells grapes to brands like Rosenblum and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars.

"Having lived in Napa for years and years, I really didn't give Lake County a second thought until I started working up here," says John Adriance, Snows Lake's chief operating officer. "It's one of the last remaining pioneer regions of California wine."

In addition to Snows Lake and Obsidian Ridge, key investors in the past decade include major Napa Valley grower Andy Beckstoffer, with his Amber Knolls development in the Red Hills; Gregory Graham, also in the Red Hills; and Shannon Ridge and Brassfield Estate in High Valley. A bit lower in elevation are Kaj and Else Ahlmann's Six Sigma property and Jim Fetzer's Ceago del Lago on the shore of Clear Lake.

Beyond offering value, Adriance says, the county's high-altitude plantings hold untold potential. Snows Lake makes a mere 500 cases total of its own wine: a Cabernet Sauvignon called One, and Two, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Even at \$50 a bottle, they stand toe-to-toe with first-rate Napa wines.

There wasn't a single vine planted in High Valley when Clay Shannon decided to buy a parcel of land in 1996. Down to earth, and with more than a little cowboy in him, Shannon is about as interested in making a \$100 bottle of wine as a cat is in taking a bath.

His reasonably priced Shannon Ridge brand now sells more than 80,000 cases annually and is beginning to make more ambitious reserve wines. He bought another 250 acres in the Red Hills last year. Shannon says quality is improving as growers continue to refine techniques.

Yet the county needs more locally made, Lake County-labeled wines to make drinkers aware of the quality. Napa Valley and other wines can contain up to 15 percent Lake County fruit without a mention on the label, and big companies like Kendall-Jackson and Beringer have long grown and bought the county's grapes.

"We're still a county that sells 75 or 80 percent of its grapes into Napa or Sonoma blends," says Shannon. In his view, the region may offer opportunities for bootstrapping young vintners hoping to start their own brands.

New opportunities

Among the young winemakers who have followed that opportunity are Matt Hughes, who moved to Lake County from Chicago in 2000, and San Francisco-based winemaker Bryan Kane, who purchased 70 acres in Red Hills a few years ago.

In 2000, "Lake County was exciting," says Hughes, now winemaker for Six Sigma. "There were a lot of new projects going in and a lot of energy. It seemed like a good place to get in on the ground floor." Initially, Hughes started his own brand, Zoom, using purchased grapes. "The only stumbling block is the low tourism traffic, which doesn't help direct sales, which are really important to a small winery."

Kane's Sol Rouge ("red soil") label is focused on Rhône varieties, which he vinifies at a facility on Treasure Island. Kane and his wife bought a 70-acre abandoned walnut orchard in the Red Hills and planted mostly Rhône varieties on densely planted steep slopes.

A site that would cost \$10 million to develop in Napa can be had for \$1 million to \$2 million in Lake County, just over the county line on the same mountain range. Kane says Napa could make great Rhône wines, but with land prices so high, he'd lose money. "For me, it's about Mayacamas mountain fruit. I love working with it."

Napa Valley winemaker Nils Venge also recently bought a Zinfandel- and Petite Sirah-focused estate called Cougar's Leap. Though he sees similarities between Napa and Lake counties, there are differences. Daytime temperatures are at least as hot as in St. Helena, one of Napa's warmer parts, but at night the air cools more rapidly than it does in lower-altitude parts of Napa Valley. Lake County's air is clear and dry, generally without fog in summer, delivering intense ultraviolet radiation. "It doesn't take much to get a sunburn out there, buddy!" Venge says. The intense sunlight prompts growers to leave additional vine canopy to shade the grapes.

Having learned a lot about growing grapes in Lake County in the past 10 years, producers seem intent on delivering on that promise of value.

"I think it's wise that no one is going up there and making \$100 wines," Venge says. "We're still earning our stripes."