

Lake County Shines

by Liza B. Zimmerman

HIGH-PROFILE FRUIT
SOURCING AND SKILLED
WINEMAKING PUT
THE SPOTLIGHT ON
LAKE COUNTY

It is not only pouring, but full-on hailing on Obsidian Ridge, the magnificent almost 3,000-foot-high vineyard rising up in Red Hills appellation of Lake County. Mint-sized balls rain down on the vineyard with such ferocity that you can barely hear the winemakers speak. Ironically, it hasn't rained for months up here. So while the stars may not always be aligned weather-wise for this AVA, north of Napa Valley and east of Mendocino, the region's marketing and grape growing goals do seem to be in sync.

Large and prestigious producers such as Hess, Duckhorn and Mondavi have long been sourcing fruit from this 8,718-acre appellation, especially good Cabernet Sauvignon. Land is much more affordable here—as is housing—and the nighttime climate often dips into the 30s and 40s much of the year, providing for very well-balanced and fruit-forward wines.

Increasing recognition from big-label producers, combined with impressive local producers such as Steele, Bodkin and Zepaltas and regional tourism outreach, have helped put this AVA on the map, as well as shelves and wine lists.

Locals are friendly and passionate, and the low entry-price of fruit allows many winemakers to offer their wines at appealing prices—often under \$20 a bottle retail—that make them ideal for by-the-glass pours. Many vintners are proud and seem steadfast about keeping prices affordable, which is something you rarely hear in the wine industry these days.

Some of my favorite finds included a few esoteric wines and even a Zinfandel, which usually isn't among my top picks. Bodkin Wines is making a crisp and acidic non-vintage sparkler from Sauvignon Blanc, called Cuvée Agincourt Brut, for \$22. The winery is also producing a superb dry 2014 Muscat Canelli—which we rarely see—with sweet notes on the nose and a honeyed palate that works beautifully with everything from salad to salmon.

Winemaker Ryan Zepaltas, who is Assistant Winemaker at the Santa Rosa-based Siduri, is also making some sensational wines under his own label. His unoaked Zepaltas 2014 Sauvignon Blanc has an incredible salinity and is priced at only \$17 a bottle. His customers have even asked him to raise the price, but he has refused.

The Shannon Ridge 2012 Zinfandel, despite a typical alcohol level of 14.8 percent, which I don't generally find food friendly, was soft, smoky and well-balanced with food: Bring on the duck breast and lamb chops! The Steele 2011 Merlot was potentially my favorite discovery, for its elegant fruit flavors and a long finish. It also comes in at such a fantastic price of \$16 a bottle retail that I almost wanted to open my own restaurant to serve it.

Challenges for the Area

While the region is still incredibly and beautifully rural, it isn't (yet) home to many restaurant or hotel properties. The hamlet of Kelseyville, in the town of Upper Lake on the northern end of Clear Lake, has one truly beautiful hotel, the Tallman, with the only restaurant—The Blue Wing—in town. Lakeport has a few more restaurants and hotels, but overall the place is still amazingly low-key.

Whether the area will heat up as a destination for sommeliers and key retailers is yet to be seen, but the region's wines are proving their own merit based on well-produced fruit handled by innovative winemakers. Lake County wines should be moving front and center on lists and shelves. ■■



PHOTO: ARPAD MOLNAR

Obsidian Ridge rises almost 3,000 feet high in the Red Hills AVA of Lake County, CA.