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Triumphant
vines and
elegant wines
erupt from the
extreme soils
of California's
Lake County.

VOLCANIC CALIFORNIA

BY JIM GORDON

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL HOUSEWRIGHT

On the heels of numerous destructive wildfires in recent years, it's understandable that the specter of volcanic eruption might not top the list of concerns for California's Lake County winemakers.

The region's producers shrugged off a recent United States Geological Survey assessment that they work in and around an active volcanic field rated as a "high threat" to the local community. Called the Clear Lake Volcanic Field, the area was ranked by the agency as 33rd among 161 potentially dangerous volcanic sites in the country.

With the current buzz around "volcanic wines," the possibility that Mount Konocti or any surrounding

cinder cones could erupt after 11,000 years may just be a boon for the image of Lake County wines.

The imprint that the region's rocky, gravelly, volcanic soils makes on the wines of Lake County is impossible to ignore. While broad-stroke assertions that the wines taste like volcanic ash, iron or salt don't apply, the final bottlings do have unique characteristics due to the region's difficult conditions and high-elevation vineyards.

Owners, winemakers and vineyard managers from four of the highest-rated estates in this Northern California region share how they tame the wild, unforgiving hills of Lake County and craft wonderful wines.



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Obsidian Ridge Black Glass Makes Powerful Cabernet

Michael Terrien (pictured here) and Winemaker Alex Beloz keep a brisk pace as they hike a forest path from one section of the Obsidian Ridge Vineyard in the Red Hills Lake County AVA to another. With each stride, oak and manzanita leaves crunch beneath their boots, and the scent of the silver pines fills the air. Everywhere underfoot is obsidian, or black volcanic glass. It sits on the surface in sharp shards that poke out of the gray, gravelly soil and in football-sized lumps that easily break apart when knocked with another stone; it shows up in every vineyard row and constitutes most of the soil in pieces as small as BB pellets.

The black glass was formed by magma that oozed out of the Clear Lake Volcanic Field and cooled quickly in the open air. It makes a strong visual impression, but its effect on the powerful, structured, Bordeaux-style red wines made here really comes from what the soil doesn't offer, both in depth and in water retention.

"By definition, young soils on slopes are where erosion occurs," says Terrien, who co-founded the 250-acre vineyard and wine brand along with brothers Peter and Arpad Molnar. "The finer silts have run down to the valley floor, leaving these boulders and gravel that don't retain any moisture."

Due to its high elevation, careful irrigation is essential during Lake County's hot and relatively short growing season.

Terrien and Beloz have increased irrigation and soil nutrition in recent years. The healthier vines have delivered richer flavors and softer tannins than in the iron-clad early vintages. The 2015 estate Cabernet Sauvignon is in the classic mode, which shows big, ripe fruit and rich tannins. The higher-priced Half Mile Cabernet Sauvignon, which is grown at 2,640 feet above sea level, tastes even more concentrated and opulent.