

Lake County: Home of California's next great Cabernet?

By Bryce Wiatrak | November 3, 2016 | Updated: November 5, 2016 4:51pm

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Photo: Peter DaSilva, Special To The Chronicle

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Winery owners Arpad and Peter Molnar at Obsidian Ridge.

A little more than a year ago, I spent a week in Bergerac, France — an ancient wine-growing region, more likely recognizable to Americans as home to the fictional Cyrano.

Many of the wines were delightful, in some cases exceptional — a few, of course, more “rustic” too. What was the greatest challenge facing Bergerac? Its western neighbor, Bordeaux.

This was hardly news. For centuries Bergerac has sought to evade the shadow of the red-wine world’s most powerful regional brand. And despite Bergerac’s recent attempts to market its own fresh identity, the vintners without fail would point out to me the storied vineyards of Saint-Émilion, so near on the horizon you could only speculate where one appellation ended and the next began.

I couldn’t help but remember Bergerac’s enduring tale as I crossed from Napa County into Lake County for my inaugural visit. For years I’d only seen Lake County from the northern reaches of Calistoga. Lake County’s viticultural history, however, commenced only three decades later than Napa’s, the first vines planted there in the 1870s. Prohibition all but destroyed Lake County’s wine industry. Winemaker Jed Steele recalls only three wineries when he first came to the area 33 years ago to establish Kendall-Jackson’s Lake County program.

That number has now increased tenfold; today more than 30 wineries occupy Lake County, propelling the region into a renewed quest to establish its place on California’s wine map. Lake County has long struggled to project its voice loudly. Roughly 80 percent of Lake County’s grapes make it to bottles without any indication of origin on the label. But many of Lake County’s top producers are placing their faith in one variety to bring the area recognition: Cabernet Sauvignon.

“People talk about Cabernet in California being monolithic; I don’t think these wines are,” says Peter Molnar, co-founder of the lauded Obsidian Ridge Vineyard. Whereas Napa generically divides itself between the brighter, more polished wines from the valley floor versus the rugged, muscular Cabernets cultivated on the hillsides, Lake County grows almost exclusively mountain fruit. “The lake itself is already at 1,300 feet above sea level,” says Debra Sommerfield, president of the Lake County Winegrape Commission. “The whole region is a high-elevation region.” With its mountainous southern border, Lake County barricades the fog that blankets so much California’s North Coast. The result is a higher intensity of UV light that can soften Cabernet’s green flavors. As a whole, Lake County Cabernet can appear lighter on its feet, exuberantly displaying a juicy red fruit purity structured by a cooling backbone of acidity.



Photo: Obsidian Ridge

Obsidian glass found at Obsidian Ridge.

Lake County is home to myriad geologically distinct soils, but the Red Hills appellation has garnered the most attention for its potential to yield world-class Cabernet Sauvignon. The region ascends from Clear Lake's southwestern banks, with Mount Konocti standing as its northern boundary. The Red Hills derives its name from the striking reddish-amber hued volcanic soils, speckled in some parts by sharp wedges of black obsidian glass, all vestiges of Konocti's last eruption 13,000 years ago. "They're unique for Cabernet soils that we've seen anywhere. We start at 2,000 feet, and that changes everything from barometric pressures to quality of light," explains all-star vineyard owner Andy Beckstoffer.

Beckstoffer is arguably California's most successful grape grower, his branded vineyards often commanding as much clout on a label as his high-end clients'. An owner of some of Napa's most coveted heritage vineyard properties, including a portion of Oakville's historic To Kalon Vineyard, Beckstoffer is placing his bets that the Red Hills will be California's next great Cabernet territory.

In 1996, Andy purchased his Amber Knolls Vineyard in the Red Hills. He explains, “In those days, we could have purchased land in Pope Valley or Napa County for basically the same price we were paying in the Red Hills. We decided to go for the quality we saw in the Red Hills and give up the name of Napa Valley, which is very valuable.”



Photo: Peter DaSilva, Special To The Chronicle

Grapes on the vine at Gregory Graham winery in Lower Lake.

Twenty years later, Beckstoffer finds that his fruit shows greater potential than the resulting wines demonstrate. In a groundbreaking campaign beginning this harvest, Beckstoffer is giving away an acre’s worth of his Lake County grapes to 10 winemakers for three vintages. The move is unprecedented; Beckstoffer typically fetches astronomical prices, at bare minimum over three times Napa’s average cost per ton for Cabernet.

Beckstoffer stipulates that winners “have to use the best barrels and materials and winemaking techniques that are used to make these cult Cabernets in Napa Valley.” He’s kept his lips sealed about the recipients. He says: “They’re people who are hungry to do something new, who are

looking to establish themselves even more in making Cabernet.”

We won't see the results of Beckstoffer's grand experiment for several years, but a handful of Red Hills producers already validate the region's promise. Obsidian Ridge bottles exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon of complexity and character, while Shannon Ridge and Gregory Graham have also made strides for the appellation.

The Red Hills is not alone in Lake County's pursuit for top-shelf Cabernet. Sommerfield says: "Cabernet grows great there, but there are other areas of the county where Cab grows very well." When May-Britt Malbec first endeavored with her late husband, Denis — both famed Napa winemakers — to purchase fruit for their Lake County label Aliénor, they searched for soils more reminiscent of Bordeaux's Left Bank. (The couple actually met while working at first-growth Château Latour.) They found that land in Big Valley, a region most Lake County wineries praise for its Sauvignon Blanc. Malbec says: "The soil reminded my husband very much of the soils in Bordeaux. They're so much more gravelly than the soil in Napa where we usually make wine." Aliénor's Grand Vin, admittedly today a blend of Cabernet Franc and Merlot, challenges the Red Hills' monopoly over quality wines from red Bordeaux varieties.

Across Clear Lake, the nascent High Valley region also indicates a proclivity to Cabernet Sauvignon. Winemaker Joy Merrilees of Shannon Ridge actually predicts that her High Valley Cabernet, a softer, more finessed expression, can outlive their Vigilance Red Hills bottling. At Brassfield, the only other property owners in High Valley, newly appointed winemaker Matt Hughes sees the same prospects, striving to expand the estate's presently small Cabernet program.

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One day, one place: Lake County's Kelseyville

Lake County isn't Napa yet. But, with any luck, it won't every have to be. Lake County's greatest asset is its grapes, and winegrowers are beginning to recognize the unique conditions that separate their Cabernet country from the rest of California's.

"You can't farm grapes in Lake County the same way you do in foggy regions. I think that's showing in the wines," Sommerfield says.

"The wines have gotten markedly better in the last 10 years. Over the next five to 10 years, that's going to grow. We'd love to share with more people the excitement we have for the region right now."

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Wines to try

2012 Obsidian Ridge "The Slope" Cabernet Sauvignon (Red Hills, Lake County) \$45, www.tricyclewine.com.

This wine might just be the best Cabernet Sauvignon presently being made in Lake County. Coming from the estate's steepest plots, "The Slope" presents itself with a broad stoicism. It offers a generous wall of concentrated red plum flavor, grounded by a foundation of rugged black earth that reflects the landscape from which the wine is born. Nuanced with more peppery floral tones, this is a Cabernet of impressive structure and aging potential.

2012 Gregory Graham Crimson Hill Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Red Hills, Lake County) \$30, www.ggwines.com

A markedly different expression of the Red Hills than Obsidian Ridge, Gregory Graham's Crimson Hill Cabernet finds an intriguing figgy, pomegranate profile. The wine carries a certain medicinal quality, tasting of balsamic-soaked herbs and autumn spice.

2010 Aliénor Grand Vin (Lake County) \$65, www.alienorwines.com

This wine is actually a blend of the other Cabernet, Cab Franc, with Merlot, but I'd be remiss not to mention this exceptional wine in the Right Bank Bordeaux tradition. Aliénor's Grand Vin feels as if it comes from another era, where flavors of dried violet, rose-petal potpourri and

antique shop mingle in perfect balance.

2014 Shannon Ridge High Valley Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (High Valley, Lake County)
\$30, www.shannonridge.com

This Cabernet speaks in more hushed tones than Shannon Ridge's Red Hills equivalent. A wine of purity and grace, the High Valley Cabernet beckons you with charming aromas of rosewater and feminine spice and the purity of its red raspberry flavor.

2012 Langtry Tephra Ridge Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Lake County) \$40,
www.langtryestate.com

Coming from Lake County's southern edge, along the foothills of Howell Mountain, Langtry's Tephra Ridge Cabernet balances lively, red berry aromas with a darker, earthier palate. The wine takes off with a fresh red currant acidity, but lingers long with spicier licorice tones.

— B.W.