



Lake County's Irrepressible Rise

By Linda Murphy

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Hail, rain and gusty wind pummeled the white tent pitched atop Obsidian Ridge Vineyard. In mid-May. In a drought. It was surreal, to say the least, for the season, when the valleys below, in Napa and Sonoma, were bone-dry in the fourth consecutive drought.

Underneath a tent, Peter Molnar, one of the vineyard's owners, tried mightily to talk over the freakish storm's din, to folks huddled there to learn more about viticulture and winemaking in Lake County. At 2,640-foot elevation, Molnar's vineyard normally would be basking in solar energy in May, its obsidian chunks and shards glinting in the sunlight.

But on this day, the storm subdued the obsidian's sparkle and reminded that Lake County, and specifically the Red Hills Lake County AVA in which Obsidian Ridge is located, is not simply a northern extension of the Mayacamas mountain range that give Napa and Sonoma their viticultural personality, but also a distinctive place with terroir all its own.

Long a provider of grapes to wineries in Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino and other California counties, Lake County is now making a name for itself with its own wines, particularly Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon. First came the growing of high-quality grapes, and now winemaking is catching up, led by a combination of experienced early Lake adopters such as Jed Steele; young winemakers fresh out of enology school who want to get their hands dirty right away, without starting in the lab in Napa or Sonoma; and a growing number of producers in those regions who embrace the quality of Lake County grapes and proudly put the appellation on their labels, rather than hiding their provenance, as many brands do.

Viticultural expertise has come from Andy Beckstoffer, an icon in Napa Valley grapegrowing and with extensive vineyard holdings in Lake's Red Hills, arguably the best ground in the county for Cabernet Sauvignon. In 2012, E. & J. Gallo purchased the 2,000-acre Snows Lake Vineyard in the Red Hills, of which 800 acres are in vines, mostly Cabernet Sauvignon. Other major players are Bella Vista, a vineyard management company owned by David Weiss, who manages 760 acres, 10 percent of which he owns and Shannon Ridge Family of Wines, which farms 1,250 acres.

Wine grapes were grown in Lake County before Prohibition, but after Repeal, the region devoted most of its agricultural efforts to walnuts, pears and illegal pot. When the first two crops became financially unviable, farmers turned to wine grapes. Among the first, famously, was Jess Jackson and his first wife, Jane Kendall, in 1974. The Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay was born in their Lakeport vineyard and went on to become one of the hottest-selling wines in the U.S.

Lakeport is the "capital" of the Clear Lake region, the lake being the largest natural one entirely within California, with more than 100 miles of shoreline. It became a major tourism center, offering boating, fishing, camping and soothing late-afternoon breezes that don't occur in the valleys to the south until evening. Grapevines love warm days and cool nights, which allow them to ripen their fruit and still retain the natural acidity within them when diurnal temperatures can swing from 50 degrees to 90 degrees and back.

Elevation and soil are also key components in Lake's ability to grow high-quality grapes. The Mayacamas range was formed by ancient volcanic eruptions, tectonic plate shifts and eons of water and wind erosion. Inactive volcano Mount Konocti, which looms large at the base of Kelseyville in the Red Hills, is 4,300 feet high, and grapevines are planted as high as 3,000 feet nearby. This results in what Molnar described as five to 10 more hours of UV light than those at sea level get, low relative humidity, and the large diurnal swing.

"We're more like Walla Walla Valley (in Washington state) than Napa or Sonoma in that we bud one month later, yet pick at the same time, due to the sunlight. The ridgetops are cooler, and the lake winds that scrape off heat."

The extra UV light prompts grapes to form thick skins as they “defend the integrity of their seeds,” Molnar explained. This means more anthocyanans, resveratrol, polyphenols and tannins, and lower pyrazines (which can lend a green, herbal character to wine).

Mount Konocti’s eruption more than 10,000 years ago scattered large deposits of obsidian (the locals call it bottle rock, and there was once a community called Bottle Rock in the area) in what became the Red Hills AVA. The jet-black, glasslike rock is shot through the brick-red soils that give the AVA its name and can be seen throughout the region. “The unrestricted drainage and meager soil fertility produce wines with great tannic structure,” Molnar explained.

Today there are 140 growers, 35 wineries and some 8,700 acres planted in Lake County. In addition to Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Tempranillo and Zinfandel are showing the most exciting future for the region, and Chardonnay (in the right hands and grown on the right spot) can be excellent. Many good-value bottles can be found from Lake, though as with any other winegrowing region, prices increase as the wines gain cachet and grape prices escalate.

Beckstoffer called Lake County “the most promising region in the New World. With the process we’re going through, the wines are going to get better every year.”

Look for these recently sampled wines for a taste of what he’s talking about:

Bodkin Wines Sparkling Sauvignon Blanc Cuvée Agincourt Brut North Coast (\$22): Fermented in tanks so as not to obliterate Sauvignon Blanc’s delicate body, this wine is a charmer, lean, lively and refreshing.

Zepaltas Wines 2014 Sauvignon Blanc Lake County (\$17): Ryan Zepaltas makes wine for Siduri Wines in Sonoma County and his own label. For Sauvignon Blanc, he went to Lake County for the grapes and produced a lemony, brisk wine that has a hint of vanillin and excellent body from the time it spent fermenting in neutral oak barrels. Great balance.

Alienor 2011 Sauvignon Blanc Lake County (\$36): This is serious Sauvignon, aged in a mix of new and neutral French oak and stainless steel. Big-bodied and leesy, it has white blossom, grapefruit and yellow stone fruit aromas and flavors and save texture. Made by former Chateau Latour cellar master Denis Malbec and his wife, May-Britt.

Cache Creek Vineyards 2013 Chardonnay Lake County (\$24): This oak- and malolactic-free wine offers pure pear and apple juiciness. It’s straightforward and well-made, though it’s a bit pricey for an unoaked style.

Sol Rouge Gypsy Rouge 2011 Red Hills Lake County (\$28): A Grenache-based blend plus Mourvedre, Syrah, Counoise, Cinsault and Petite Sirah, it’s polished, supple and fresh-tasting, yet with excellent grip and spicy kick.

Alienor Syrah 2009 Castelero Vineyard Lake County (\$45): Denis Malbec discovered this vineyard when he worked with Six Sigma Ranch. From his own label comes this invigorating older vintage of Syrah, perfumed and with rich black and blue fruit, medium-full body and firm acid and tannin backbone. Outstanding.

Six Sigma 2012 Ranch Diamond Mine Cuvée Lake County (\$18): A fabulous value, it’s a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo and Syrah, and the three varietals mesh beautifully. Think juicy blackberry and dark cherry plumped by racy acidity and framed by gentle oak.

R Vineyards 2012 Cabernet Franc Lake County (\$22): A refined wine with impeccable weight and body, floral aromas, firm black raspberry fruit and just the right touch of herbaceousness.

Obsidian Ridge 2012 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Red Hills Lake County (\$30): It shows classic Cabernet herbal character on the nose and a palate of dark plum and black cherry fruit. Tightly tannic now, it should open with more time in bottle. Truly a “mountain Cab.”