

THE LAKE COUNTY ERUPTION

**THE REGION'S WINES RUMBLE
WITH INTENSITY AND ELEGANCE**

by Randy Caparoso / photos by Nathan DeFart



OUR LAKE COUNTY SOMM CAMPERS FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Debra Sommerfield, Executive Director, Lake County Winegrape Commission, aka Lake County Winegrape Growers; Pier-Alexis Soulière, MS, Manresa Restaurant, Los Gatos, CA; Peter Molnar, Partner, Obsidian Ridge; Traci Dutton, The Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, St. Helena, CA; Diego Bermudez, Mastro's Steakhouse, Chicago; Jonathan Walters, Director of Farming, Brassfield Estate Winery; Jerusha Frost, Monkey Bar, Cafeteria & Empire Diner, New York City; Anibal Calcagno, Oceana, New York City; Romain Pardo, Vin Sur Vingt, New York City; James Wasson, SingleThread Farms, Healdsburg, CA; Chuck Herrold, Monterey Bay Wine Company; Dawn Smith, John Howie Steak, Seattle; Patty Beck, DWS, Old Homestead Steakhouse, Caesars Palace, Las Vegas; Christopher Harris, Smyth + The Loyalist, Chicago; Rachael Ryan, High Treason, San Francisco; Matthew Bills, Eden Restaurant, Chicago; and Boseon (Sunny) Kwon, Aureole Las Vegas by Charlie Palmer, Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas. Missing in the photo is Patrick Mullane of Forbes Mill Steakhouse, Los Gatos, CA.



During one of our SOMM Camp field seminars sponsored by the Lake County Winegrape Growers this past June, we stood overlooking a spectacular volcanic landscape of fiery slopes defining the Red Hills Lake County AVA from a rocky ledge called Pride Rock.

Randy Krag, Vineyard Manager for Beckstoffer Vineyards, proceeded to tell us about the geological history of what we were seeing. "This is the weathered



Atop Pride Rock, Randy Caparoso takes a photo of Beckstoffer's Red Hills Lake County vineyards below.

result of lava flows taking place as recently as 11,000 years ago," he said, adding that the most similar types of soils are found on the island of Maui—essentially one giant volcano top.

In his book *Volcanic Wines: Salt, Grit and Power*, John Szabo, MS, devotes an entire chapter to Lake County's Clear Lake Volcanic Field. He writes, "The entire area sits on a massive volcanic complex," consisting of "multiple lava domes and cinder cones . . . Numerous hot springs and volcanic gas seeps are clear indications of its potential to erupt again."

These are true "mountain" vineyards. Nearly all of Lake County's vineyards are planted 1,330–3,000 feet above sea level and yield some of the most intense, singing and elegantly-structured wines in the New World, the Old World or any world.



James Wasson studies a bottle during the opening reception at Blue Wing Saloon.

OPENING NIGHT RECEPTION AT THE BLUE WING SALOON

Lake County may not be a mecca of hotels, but you will find few retreats as "country" posh as our SOMM Camp home for three nights: the Tallman Hotel, lovingly restored from a 19th-century stagecoach stop and its requisite Old West saloon. There, during our opening reception, we were given our first taste of the phenomenally-deep yet soaringly-fruited style of wines common to Lake County with a lineup of Rhône style bottlings. Some highlights:

R Vineyards 2016 Lake County Viognier Billowing perfumes of peach, pineapple and jasmine couched in a silky, medium-full body.

Fore Family Vineyards 2016 Cobb Mountain Vineyard Grenache Blanc, Red Hills Lake County Compellingly anise/tarragon-like, white-peach and toasted-almond perfumes; crisp, acid charged, light-medium body; spot-on with oven roasted halibut in carrot endive broth and crisped leeks.

Gregory Graham 2012 Crimson Hill Vineyard Grenache, Red Hills Lake County Lush strawberry, nostril-tingling black pepper and smidgens of red rose petal in round, nimble-feeling medium body.

Brassfield Estate 2015 Volcano Ridge Vineyard Grenache, High Valley Lake County Even more exuberant black pepper-spiced cherry/cranberry perfume; light, velvety and zesty with acidity on the palate.

Steele 2014 Stymie Syrah, Lake County Brightly-aromatic sensations of blueberry, violet and sprigs of mint punctuating a soft, liquid medium body.

Obsidian Ridge 2014 Syrah, Red Hills Lake County Denser, meatier style; tight nose, yet layered with almost chocolaty, saturating flavors of meat and chunky berries; tailor-made for our grilled J-S bison ribeye with foraged mushrooms and Cabernet demi-glacé.



Split canopy-trellised Sauvignon Blanc in Windrem Vineyard.

DAY 1:

SAUVIGNON BLANC VITICULTURE AND SHEEP CAMP



A pensive David Weiss, Owner of Bella Vista Farming Company in the High Valley District AVA.



Chacewater Windrem Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc.

Our first full day started with a vineyard breakfast hosted by U.S. Congressman Mike Thompson on his property, planted completely to Sauvignon Blanc in the Big Valley District AVA. This is one of Lake County's more gently-sloped appellations, located along the southern shores of the west end of Clear Lake with elevations largely between 1,330 (just a foot above the normal lake level) and 1,440 feet.

Bella Vista Farming Company owner David Weiss—who manages Congressman Thompson's Adobe Creek Ranch and several other growers' properties, as well as his own Rooster Vineyard—explained how Lake County became California's most highly-sought supplier of Sauvignon Blanc.

"All the right ingredients are here: fairly rich, gravelly, silty clay loam soils at least 20 feet deep; our wide diurnal fluctuations; and, since the lake draws in the air, not a lot of fog, so there's less mildew and disease pressure," Weiss told us. "You'll hear all our vintners talk about Lake County sunlight; there is more accumulation of light and heat during the day here than most of California. At the same time, nighttime temperatures get as low as 50 degrees [Fahrenheit],

Brassfield Estate Winery 2016 Sauvignon Blanc, High Valley Steel and concrete egg (15%) fermented; intriguing interplay of weedy, flowery, lemon and honey-dipped citrus skin notes; with bracingly-crisp, lemony and mineral dryness.

Dancing Crow Vineyards 2015 Sauvignon Blanc, Big Valley District Lower Brix picking resulting in 12% alcohol; tight, lemony character with a light, citrusy feel.

Six Sigma 2015 Sauvignon Blanc, Lake County Lower Lake (non-AVA region on east side of Clear Lake) estate bottling; flowery notes with subtle herbiness; lean, refreshing and lemony edginess.

Vigilance 2016 Sauvignon Blanc, Red Hills Lake County From this appellation's iconic, red volcanic soils; the most floral/"pretty" style with light lemon and herbiness; a slightly briny, citrusy edge contrasted by an airy and perky palate feel.

Shannon Ridge 2016 Sauvignon Blanc, Lake County A Red Hills/High Valley blend; slightly weedy nose with subtle floral flourishes; citrus sensations with a rounded, easy feel.

High Valley Vineyards 2016 Sauvignon Blanc, High Valley Weedy and citrus skin aromas; fleshier, round style underlined by an easy acid balance.

Pech Merle 2016 Sauvignon Blanc, Big Valley Effusively floral perfume suggesting violet and citrus; lightly tart, fresh and buoyant.

Oro En Paz 2016 Luchsinger Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc, High Valley Partial whole berry (skin) fermentation, yielding a lean, lemony and herby wine with slightly feral "animal" notes.

Chacewater 2016 Windrem Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc, Big Valley Floral, honeyed, leafy green pea, and very lemony, racy, multifaceted qualities in the nose and palate.

Gregory Graham Windrem Vineyard 2015 Sauvignon Blanc, Big Valley Pretty, high-toned, honeyed qualities with a slightly sharp, briny edge and creamy (partial) barrel-fermented esters rounding out the finish.

Boatique Winery 2016 Sauvignon Blanc Musque, Red Hills Lake County Concrete egg fermented; low-key flowery scent and combination of briny, creamy and lemony textures.

Brassfield Estate Winery 2016 Sauvignon Blanc Reserve, High Serenity Ranch, High Valley Reflecting, as winemaker Matt Hughes puts it, "the weirdest things I could do" (four-day skin contact/native yeast fermentation); a creamy-textured style flashing high acid and flowery, violet-like perfumes that leap from the glass.

giving us consistently good acid balance.”

“The key is a balance of canopy and fruit—keep in mind, these vines are maintaining high acid levels in an appellation roughly the latitude of Morocco,” Weiss continues. “Too much canopy, and we get too much pyrazine, or green qualities. Too much fruit, and the vine takes longer to ripen, and intensity is diluted. The result is a style of Sauvignon Blanc that is somewhere between the herby, acidic style of New Zealand and the softer, tropical fruit style of most of California. That’s why Lake County became the go-to place for this grape.”

In the Windrem Vineyard, barely a mile from Adobe Creek Ranch, Weiss and Chacewater Winery Owner/Winemaker Mark Burch teamed up to demonstrate Sauvignon Blanc trained on quadrilateral trellises. The spurs spread out horizontally on split wires in an “S” configuration, with a good two feet between fruit zones. Explained

Weiss, “The advantage of this canopy system is that we get an even more ideal ratio of dappled sunlight on the grapes.” Burch added, “The split canopy of Windrem gives us more style potential. There is enough sunlight to limit pyrazine character while not entirely erasing it, and we get beautiful tropical fruit character without the fruitiness becoming dominant. Yet we’re picking somewhere between 22- and 23-degree Brix, which gives us a beautiful balance of high acid and moderate alcohol.”

We were treated to a 12-wine study of Sauvignon Blanc during our next stop at Brassfield Estate Winery in the High Valley AVA—located along the north side of Clear Lake and planted at altitudes ranging from 1,600 feet on this elevated valley floor to 3,000 feet atop higher slopes—ostensibly to help us sort through terroir-related distinctions.

“The Lake County style is characterized by varietal clarity and freshness, usually

with ample natural acidity, good citrus and maybe some tropical qualities, plus subtle green aromatics with zero bell pepper or vegetal notes,” Brassfield Winemaker Matt Hughes commented. Marke Burch was more succinct, describing Lake County Sauvignon Blancs as “highly-refined packets of juicy fruit gum.”

Our Sauvignon Blanc tasting was followed by a steep climb up to the property’s highest blocks (2,900 feet above sea level) in Brassfield’s Perspective Vineyard. The close-spaced, 5-by-3 feet planting of Syrah and Viognier on slopes dropping directly into Clear Lake is scrubbed by daily winds pulled in from the Pacific Ocean just 21 miles away. At the top, we tasted a laser beam-like **Brassfield 2016 Perspective Vineyard High Valley Viognier**, which electrified the palate with taut, acid-edgy, violet- and honey-scented sensations. A barrel sample of **Brassfield 2016 Perspective Vineyard**



Director of Winemaking Matt Hughes leads the Sauvignon Blanc tasting at Brassfield Estate Winery.



A slew of amazing Sauvignon Blancs from Lake County.



Head-trained heirloom Cinsaut in front of the 19th-century barn at Shannon Ridge.



Clay Shannon with mother vine Cinsaut at Shannon Ridge, with Patty Beck, Matthew Bills, Sunny Kwon, Jerusha Frost and Christopher Harris in the background.



Shannon 2014 House Ranch Reserve Malbec.

Syrah that was co-fermented with 10% Viognier came across with luscious, violet-nuanced raspberry concentration packed into a meaty body vibrant with natural acidity—your proverbial iron fist in a silk glove.

Our next High Valley stop was at Shannon Ridge—a spectacular 2,000-acre property planted to 800 acres of vines at 1,700–2,400 feet. Among the diversity of grapes cultivated by Owner/Grower Clay Shannon are Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Mourvèdre, Syrah, Barbera, Nero d'Avola, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, and even Cinsaut culled from a prostrate “mother vine” found on the property that most likely dates back to the 1870s.

Shannon spoke about his grass-fed lamb program, which enhances their sustainable farming; up to 400 head at a time are put to work in the vineyard blocks each spring, all the way to veraison. Shannon explained that on top of the efficient mowing and addition of soil-enriching compost furnished by the flocks, “there is no better way to leaf the vines than with sheep—their little mouths will remove all the foliage around the green clusters in a way that is far more gentle than what we could do by hand.”

Shannon pulled out all the stops for a “Sheep Camp Cook-Out,” treating our sommeliers to appetizers of Dungeness crab cakes and riblets of “spring” 6-month-old grass-fed lamb, followed by wood-grilled double racks of Shannon Ridge lamb chops with grilled asparagus and other fixings—wonderful with a zesty, black fruit-toned **2013 High Valley Lake County Barbera**.



Sommers Matthew Bills, Anibal Calcagno and Romain Pardo pass double-racks of Shannon Ridge spring lamb at the Shannon Ridge cook-out.

DAY 2: RED HILLS AND TEMPRANILLO MADNESS

At 9 a.m. on our second day, we gathered under an outdoor tent in Obsidian Ridge Vineyard, which is located on a 2,300–2,640-foot ridge of the Mayacamas Mountains along the southern edge of Red Hills Lake County. With its lofty view of Mount Konocti and the southwest shores of Clear Lake, this was a perfect spot for Founding Partner and Grower Peter Molnar to ruminate on his favorite topic: “The Elevation of Wine.”

“For years now, climatologists like Southern Oregon University’s Greg Jones have been warning the industry that global warming is real, and everyone on the West Coast has been experiencing its repercussions firsthand,” Molnar said. “But



Peter Molnar, Founding Partner and Grower, explains Lake County mountain terroir at Obsidian Ridge Vineyard.



Jerusha Frost and James Wasson nose through a Bordeaux varietal tasting at Boatique Winery.

when we look at our own tracking of degree days, comparing time periods of 1971–2000 with 2000–2008, Lake County stands out among the California wine regions because it is getting cooler, not hotter. Why is that?”

Molnar cites Lake County’s high elevation and configuration of mountain slopes surrounding Clear Lake, conducive to cooling coastal air rising in vertical motion, as literally “scrubbing heat away.” At the same time, the fog line falls at lower elevations on the Mayacamas—leaving Lake County, in Molnar’s words, “higher, dryer, colder and, importantly, with more sun . . . We have the highest solar potential in the state.”

Molnar makes a distinction between light and heat. “The combination of higher altitude and thinner air means increased

Steele 2014 Cabernet Franc, Lake County

Cherry/raspberry nose with minimal herbiness; compact feel and smooth, soft leather texture with zippy acid.

Chacewater 2013 Malbec, Red Hills Lake County

Classic hibiscus varietal nose (Hawaiian Punch-like) with cedar-y nuance; medium-full and velvety, yet burly with tannin.

Shed Horn Cellars 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon, Lake County

Bright red berry nose with green-weedy and woody notes; light-medium body balanced with moderate tannin.

Langtry 2013 Tephra Ridge Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Lake County

Deep color and lightly weedy, dark berry nose; fistful of dense, meaty, velvet sensations.

Steele 2014 Beckstoffer Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Hills Lake County

Red berry nose with cassis-like focus; plummy, moderately-weighted feel; rounded tannin.

Dancing Crow Vineyards 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Hills Lake County

5% Petite Sirah; sweet-toned concentration (blueberry/violet/cassis/greenwood); sturdy, medium-full feel.

Obsidian Ridge 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Hills Lake County

5% Petite Sirah/Petit Verdot/Malbec; 100% Hungarian oak aged (to minimize oak influence); black ruby color; concentrated black cherry and cola with a forest-y edge; full and velvety yet muscular with pointed mountain tannin.

High Valley Vineyards 2014 Betsy's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, High Valley

Vivid purplish red; herby pyrazine notes mixed with black cherry, cocoa powder and sweet oak; tight yet zesty with unruly youth (slightly angular acid/tannin).

Brassfield Estate Winery 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon, High Valley

10% Malbec/Petit Verdot; sweetly concentrated with high-toned black fruit and minimal pyrazine; muscular tannin and roasted coffee finish, yet a luxurious feel.

Six Sigma Ranch 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon, Lake County

10% Merlot/Petit Verdot; black/purple color; sweetly-concentrated nose with wild, woody/forest floor notes; chocolaty rich, full tannin, espresso-spice finish—"mountain" power.

Cache Creek 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon, Lake County

A more matured "ringer" demonstrating the possible evolution of Lake County reds; smoky, herby, exotic and almost hoisin-like sweetness in nose; fine, silky, medium-full body.



A lineup of Red Hills Lake County Bordeaux varieties.

UV exposure, which has a direct and positive impact on plant growth," he explained. "With higher UV, for instance, grapes build slightly thicker skins—which is why there is such enormous potential for Cabernet Sauvignon in this county."

"With good canopy management we can moderate pyrazines, and grow Cabernet Sauvignon with all the color and tannin you want in the grape, but with more range and complexity—pretty Cabernet Sauvignons, with red fruits, dark fruits, violet, rose, lavender and all manner of non-fruit qualities, depending upon the site," he continued.

Following Molnar's practicum on Lake County terroir, we reconvened at a Red Hills Lake County estate called Boatique Winery for a tasting of Bordeaux varietals led by Brassfield's Matt Hughes and Dancing Crow Vineyards' David and Katharine DeSante. See the tasting notes in the lefthand sidebar.

The view of Mt. Konocti from Obsidian Ridge in Red Hills Lake County.





Andy Beckstoffer, Owner/Grower, Beckstoffer Vineyards.



Owner/Grower Kaj Ahlmann leading the Tempranillo vertical tasting in Diamond Mine Vineyard at Six Sigma Ranch.



Sunny Kwon during the vertical tasting of Diamond Mine Vineyard at Six Sigma Ranch.

Following an al fresco lunch hosted by Andy Beckstoffer in his 844-acre Amber Knolls Vineyard, Vineyard Manager Randy Krag led us through Beckstoffer's adjoining Red Hills Lake County planting. Called Crimson Ridge Vineyard, it climbs as high as 2,950 feet on the east-facing slopes of Mount Konocti. Beckstoffer explains why he planted 1,300 acres on his Red Hills Lake County property (plus another 200 acres to come): "These red, rocky clay soils are *made* for Cabernet Sauvignon. André Tchelistcheff said you should diversify when planting new vineyards. We diversified by planting all the best clones of Cabernet Sauvignon, plus 30 acres of Malbec."

To the east of Red Hills Lake County is an extension of this mountainous region near the Lower Lake community where the Six Sigma Ranch is located. This property, founded and farmed by Kaj Ahlmann and his family, is its own ecosystem: Cattle, sheep, pigs and 50 acres of grapes are raised amongst a largely-untouched forest habitat for deer, bobcat, turkey, wild pig, bear and other wildlife.

Six Sigma's highest-planted point at 1,700 feet stands in their Diamond Mine Vineyard—named for the shimmering quartz crystals strewn throughout the vineyard's rocky volcanic soil. The vineyard is farmed sustainably with a no-till philosophy to leave organic micro-organisms undisturbed, and teams of sheep help keep the native cover crop trim.

Diamond Mine also represents a Quixotic labor of love inspired by the wines of Vega Sicilia and Pingus, among others, as well as the Ahlmanns' strong conviction that the high-altitude mountain terroir of Lake County is equally fertile ground for Tempranillo. Hence, our sommeliers were treated to an exhilarating vertical of every bottled vintage of Six Sigma Tempranillo under a tent overlooking the vineyard.

At the climactic outdoor dinner hosted by the Ahlmann family, highlighted by servings of Six Sigma-grown produce and tapenade-laced pork, we enjoyed a **2013 Six Sigma Diamond Mine Cuvée** (63% Tempranillo/26% Cabernet Sauvignon/11% Syrah). It seemed to epitomize the soaring clarity, boldly-phenolic texturing, proportionate scale and hauntingly-transparent (in the sense of forest and brush) qualities we had found in so many of the Lake County reds over the past two and a half days.

In other words, this region is just beginning to rumble, and forward-thinking sommeliers everywhere would be wise to take heed!

SIX SIGMA TEMPRANILLO VERTICAL

2005: The inaugural vintage's young vines yielded a sweetly-perfumed red (violet and berry jam) and velvety flavors with zesty acid underpinning; still very fresh, alive and kicking.

2006: A shyer yet even prettier nose brightly redolent of raspberry fruit; zesty acidity and moderate tannin adding to a taut, solidly-structured medium-full body.

2007: Earthy nose with muted fruit; veering towards forest floor and leather and obscuring the fruit definition on the palate.

2008: Continuation of the estate's tight, earthy phase; rounded feel, yet lean in fruit sensations.

2009: Sweet balsamic notes dominate the nose; zesty, bony, light-medium body with a composting leafiness in the finish.

2010: *Muy bonita* nose of black cherry toward raspberry; soft entry, but tightened by middle-age tannin towards middle.

2011: Perfume-y red cherry nose; firm, zesty, taut and somewhat lean, but upbeat and almost tingly with the vintage's quietly-fruited qualities on the palate.

2012: Red-berry perfume mixed with saddle leather (perceptible *Brettanomyces*); a lean profile, yet zesty with acid.

2013: A group favorite; deep, plummy black cherry aroma tweaked with kitchen herbs; very fresh, rounded, velvety and layered—a real achievement.

2014: Another group favorite; bright, fresh qualities reflecting the best of Lake County terroirs; black cherry varietal character tinged with notes of black olive and cooking herbs; firm, dense and meaty, yet suavely textured on the palate—seems to fulfill the promise of the earliest vintages.



Shannon Ridge vineyard just beyond the bowing trees.



A farm-to-table dinner on the campers' final night in Lake County.



Six Sigma Ranch's Tempranillo.

PARTICIPATING LAKE COUNTY SOMM CAMP WINERIES:

Boatique Winery (boatiquewines.com)
Brassfield Estate Winery (brassfieldestate.com)
Cache Creek Vineyards (cachecreekvineyards.com)
Chacewater Winery & Olive Mill (chacewaterwine.com)
Dancing Crow Vineyards (dancingcrow.com)
Fore Family Vineyards (forefamilyvineyards.com)
Gregory Graham Wines (ggwines.com)
Langtry Estate & Vineyard (langtryestate.com)
Obsidian Ridge (tricyclewine.com)
Oro En Paz (oroenpaz.com)
Pech Merle Winery (pechmerlewinery.com)
R Vineyards (rvineyards.com)
Shannon Ridge/High Valley Vineyard/Vigilance Winery & Vineyards (shannonridge.com)
Shed Horn Cellars (shedhorncellars.com)
Six Sigma Ranch, Vineyards & Winery (sixsigmaranch.com)
Steele Wines (steelewines.com)
Lake County Wine Studio (lakecountywinestudio.com)
Hawk and Horse Vineyards (hawkandhorsevineyards.com)
Shutter Wines (shutterwines.com)
Wildhurst (wildhurst.com)
Rosa d'Oro (rosadorovineyards.com)