

# WINE COUNTRY TABLE

*With Recipes that Celebrate  
California's Sustainable Harvest*

**RIZZOLI**  
NEW YORK

JANET FLETCHER



## LAKE COUNTY

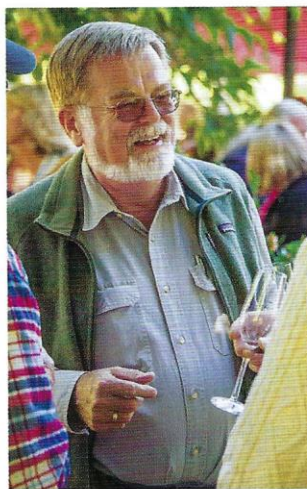
### SIX SIGMA WINERY

The real-estate broker was starting to lose patience with Kaj Ahlmann. Nineteen vineyard properties viewed; nineteen no's. Finally, on the twentieth attempt, Ahlmann found the parcel that seduced him: 4,000 acres (1620 ha) of oak-covered hills and pasture in rural Lake County.

The vast site had everything he desired for his future winery: high-elevation slopes with fast-draining volcanic soils, warm days to ripen wine grapes, and cool nights to preserve their acidity. A longtime cattle ranch, the landscape also offered miles of unspoiled beauty, a draw for Ahlmann and his nature-loving wife, Else.

The Ahlmanns purchased the ranch in 2000 and began its transformation into Six Sigma Winery, a multifaceted enterprise with 50 acres (20 ha) of grapevines and small-scale production of beef, lamb, and heritage-breed pork. Son Christian manages the vineyards—Tempranillo is the estate's signature red, Sauvignon Blanc the predominant white—while Christian's wife, Rachel, oversees the livestock.

From the start, family members knew that they wanted to farm more than grapes. "I like wine—don't get me wrong—but land is my big passion," says Kaj. "Wine is a way to make it profitable."



His romance with dirt blossomed early. As a fourteen-year-old in his native Denmark, Kaj asked his parents for a patch of land to mark his confirmation in the Lutheran Church. (Other teens had parties.) He grew potatoes, carrots, lettuces, and plums, inspired by his grandfather. Later, as a prominent insurance executive in the United States, Kaj joined the board of The Nature Conservancy and helped spearhead efforts to restore endangered prairie grass in Kansas.

**COMMITTED TO PRESERVATION** Shortly after purchasing the ranch, the Ahlmanns put most of it in a conservation easement, thus preserving it in agriculture forever. The move calmed the area's environmentalists, who had feared the worst when they learned that the parcel had changed hands. Kaj and Christian encouraged locals to come see what they were doing, how they were planting vineyards with the natural contours of the land. "It's not financially the best approach compared to straight rows that you can easily service with a tractor, but we like how it feels," says Kaj.

Today, many formerly apprehensive neighbors are members of Six Sigma's wine club. The Sierra Club has invited Christian to speak about the Ahlmanns' approach, as an example of conscientious environmental management. "We're a role model now, and I love that," says Kaj. "You don't buy this much land to destroy it."





**FACING PAGE:** Six Sigma proprietor Kaj Ahlmann

**ABOVE:** Six Sigma's ranch-to-table dinners always draw a sellout crowd to enjoy wines and pork produced on the property. For many vintners, such gatherings are a highlight of the winemaking year.





The livestock contribute to the sustainable practices. The miniature Babydoll sheep reliably mow down vineyard weeds and fertilize as they go. Black Angus cattle thrive outdoors year-round here, rotating among multiple pastures. When wildfires devastated their neighbors, Six Sigma escaped largely unscathed because the cattle had kept the brush in check. Even so, compared to the previous owner, the Ahlmanns maintain a much reduced herd, limited to numbers they believe their land can support.

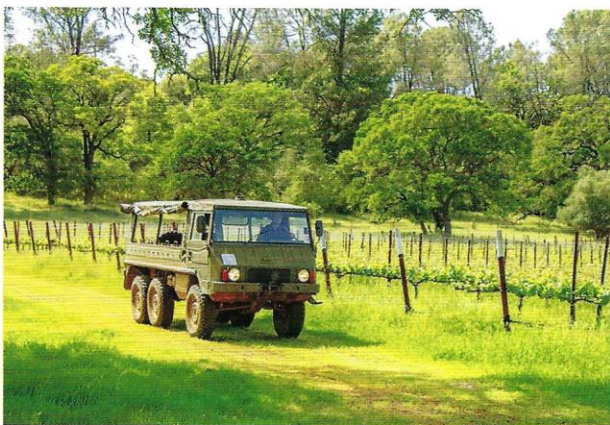
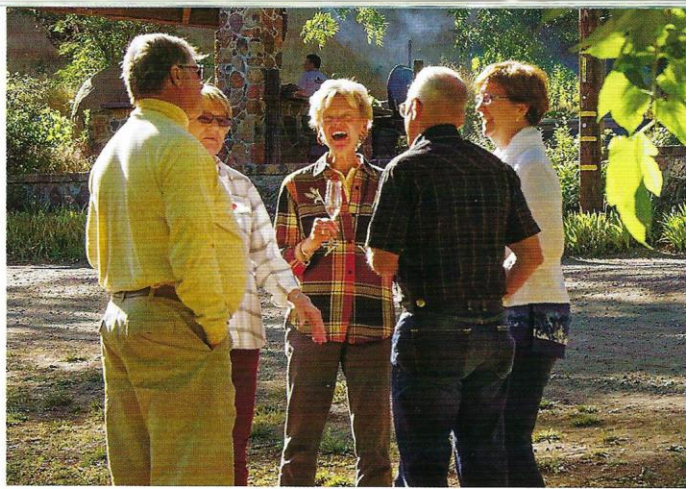
**RANCH LIFE FOR ALL** Over the years, the family has recognized that customers want a taste of life on their ranch. In a restored Pinzgauer, a rugged all-terrain Austrian military vehicle, the Ahlmanns take visitors to see the property's highest-elevation vines, the Diamond Mine



Vineyard at 1,700 feet (518 m). Named for the tiny nuggets of quartz that glisten in rocks on the site, the scenic spot offers a view of distant Mount Konocti, a dormant volcano on the south shore of Clear Lake, and overlooks vineyard blocks named for each of the Ahlmanns' four children.

The winery's popular ranch to-table dinners, served family-style at one long table, give participants a chance to savor grilled steaks or braised lamb from animals raised on the property, local vegetables with raw milk butter, and perhaps flatbreads from Rachel's hand-built wood-burning oven. In early spring, Six Sigma's annual Pruning & Pastries competition pits local vineyard workers against one another in a test of speed and expertise. Professional judges award cash prizes, wine-club members provide the cheers, and culinary





students from the local community college supply the *pains au chocolat*.

“People really care about being part of the ranch experience,” says Kaj, who rigorously gathers and analyzes the consumer data that determine many of the winery decisions. Indeed, the Ahlmanns named their business after the influential Six Sigma techniques, a data-driven

management tool that manufacturers use to improve processes.

Data points like ratings and consumer feedback help winemaker Sandy Robertson decide how to shape Six Sigma’s wines, but only passionate environmentalists could have shaped this property. Just inside the front gate, sheep graze in a vineyard’s knee-high cover crop. Nearby, wild turkeys strut about on spindly legs, flashing splendid tail feathers. Around a curve, a dozen ebony-skinned cattle may be lumbering across the road, oblivious to traffic. Is this a nature preserve, a wildlife corridor, a vineyard, a ranch, or a winery? Thanks to the Ahlmanns, it is successfully all of the above.

**ABOVE:** (clockwise from top left) Six Sigma’s summer ranch-to-table dinners bring the winery’s fans together to enjoy the beauty of this remote Lake County ranch. Estate wines, local produce, and meats from livestock raised on the property are part of the draw, along with ranch tours in a 1973 Pinzgauer, an Austrian all-terrain vehicle built for the Swiss military.





### WHERE SAUVIGNON BLANC SHINES

Lake County's reputation as a source for well-priced Sauvignon Blanc continues to climb as growers home in on the best sites for this variety. The grape loves the plentiful sunlight the county's high elevation provides, assuring ripeness and the development of tropical-fruit and citrus aromas, while cool evenings preserve the crisp acidity that makes Sauvignon Blanc so refreshing.

"Lake County has diurnal swings that other regions can't duplicate," says Christian Ahlmann of Six Sigma Ranch & Winery. The difference between daytime high and nighttime low temperature can reach more than 50 degrees Fahrenheit (28 degrees Celsius) in summer in some areas, as afternoon breezes sweep down off the mountains. This natural daily cool-down helps extend the growing season, producing more complex flavors and balance in both grapes and wine.

Sauvignon Blanc grown in cooler climates tends to have grassy or herbaceous aromas; in hot regions, it loses its steely backbone. Lake County's high-elevation vineyards deliver the climatic middle ground: abundant sunlight that translates to thick skins and generosity of fruit but brisk acidity thanks to the moderating effect of nearby Clear Lake.

Lake County's Big Valley District AVA, where most of the county's Sauvignon Blanc vines are planted, has predominantly alluvial soil and yields relatively lush wine with pineapple and guava aromatics. But some growers are finding another rewarding spot for Sauvignon Blanc at higher elevations, moving their plantings from the fertile valley to the foothills and slopes of the High Valley and Kelsey Bench AVAs, where rocky volcanic soils bring stingier yields but racier acids.

Thanks to the rising prestige and price for Lake County Sauvignon Blanc, wineries outside the county who relied on it to lower the cost of their blends may have to look elsewhere. Embraced by Lake County vintners, the grape that dominates France's Loire Valley has found another comfortable home. Says Ahlmann, "Sauvignon Blanc practically grows itself in Lake County."

**ABOVE AND RIGHT:** (clockwise from top left) Six Sigma vines coexist with oaks; Sauvignon Blanc clusters; good times at Six Sigma; fresh pour of Sauvignon Blanc; thriving cover crop at Six Sigma



