



Chronicle / Eric Luse

## [Wine country moves north](#) [Affordable land and unique soils lure vintners to Lake County](#)

- Kathleen Buckley, Special to The Chronicle  
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The reality of Lake County is not its Clear Lake trailer parks -- or even its bass fishing, country music or nude hot springs. Ask any geologist: Lake County is a playground for anyone who likes seriously unusual dirt.

Geologists plan trips to Lake County just to look at the soil. The volcanic cones and diamonds in the landscape are a result of millions of years of environmental history. And now winemakers and viticulturists are beating a path through the rocky soil to plant vineyards and build wineries.

Despite a long history of growing grapes, Lake County's modern wine industry is still in its infancy, with only 14 wineries -- 11 with tasting rooms. A mere five years ago, there were only four wineries. Industry giant Kendall-Jackson started its business here in 1982 with the persevering talent of Jed Steele, the winemaker who helped create Kendall-Jackson's successful style of Chardonnay. Steele left Kendall-Jackson to make his own wine in 1991 and opened his Kelseyville winery in 1996. Now, the iconoclastic Steele's winery is the unofficial first stop for new arrivals looking to make stellar wine in the county.

Other major forces in the industry, such as Robert Mondavi Winery, Foster's Wine Estates and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars's Hawk Crest Wines, also buy Lake County grapes.

There are many reasons for the viticultural region's sudden growth, not the least of which is the surprisingly successful adaptation of some varietals to mountain terrain. Cabernet Sauvignon, a tough grape, thrives on the red volcanic slopes, and Petite Sirah, a powerful tannic red wine grape with a growing fan base, also shows promise. Sauvignon Blanc is moving from the fertile alluvial valley on the south side of Clear Lake to less fertile locations upslope to capture minerals and produce lower yields.

This new lease on life for Lake County grapes and wines came about, as many changes do, in response to a crisis.

Starting in the mid-1990s, just as Napa County vineyard real estate was beginning to soar, the market for bulk grapes produced by Lake County growers began to slide. This put vineyards, as well as orchards from an equally weak Bartlett pear market, on the real estate block. With acreage selling for 10 percent of the price of similar land in Napa Valley, Lake County land was a bargain for vineyard hunters.

Andy Beckstoffer, the largest vineyard landowner in Napa County, bought 2,000 acres near Kelseyville -- in what is now the Red Hills Lake County appellation -- beginning in 1997. Since then, land purchases and vineyard development, both large and small, have continued at breakneck speed.

As new vineyards began to produce high-quality grapes, wineries opened. And with bottles often selling for as little as \$14, Lake County's wines are bargains compared with similarly rated wines from Napa Valley and Sonoma County.

North of Napa County and east of Sonoma and Mendocino counties, Lake County's 8,500 acres of vineyard border three of California's most influential viticultural regions. In the early 1900s, Lake County had more than 7,000 acres of grapes and 36 wineries, more than Napa and Sonoma counties combined.

But during Prohibition, vines were replaced with walnuts and pears. From the 1950s on, Lake County vineyards grew large volumes of grapes that were sold to wineries from other regions, often for a "California" blend. "Lake County" never appeared on the label.

Paul Skinner, owner of vineyard development company Terra Spase, says he is amazed at Lake County's potential. The developer admits that creating a vineyard in Lake County's demanding landscape, high altitudes and virgin land can be tough. For example, at 2,300 to 2,600 feet, the land that became Obsidian Ridge Vineyard was so filled with rock that tractor blades broke as co-owner and vineyard manager Peter Molnar cleared two tons of obsidian, a volcanic glass-like black rock that is hard enough to make surgical tools.

Skinner, who performs elaborate soil analyses, says the key to producing grapes for great wine, particularly in Lake County, is to find what growers call the "sweet spots."

## **It's not Napa**

"The home run for us in Lake County is not to be Napa, but to be able to produce wines that are unique," said John Adriance, COO for Snows Lake Vineyard, a custom producer that sells its grapes to various wineries. In January 2007, Snows Lake will release its first two wines.

Geologists say that volcanic upheavals dating back several million years (the last was 10,000 years ago) created Clear Lake, the oldest natural lake in North America. The volcanoes and earthquake fault lines also produced the world's largest geothermal mass of hot springs, on the Sonoma-Lake county border.

All this natural plumbing juts through a field of lava up to 15 miles deep to the calcium- and potassium-rich red-iron volcanic surface. The result is unusually porous, grape-loving dirt.

Clay and Margarita Shannon of Shannon Ridge Vineyards own some of the most mountainous vineyards in High Valley, located on the northeast side of Clear Lake, at altitudes that approach 3,000 feet. They sell Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, Cabernet Franc, Syrah and Zinfandel grapes to other producers looking to add mountain character to their wines. The Shannons released their first wine under their own label in 2004, after years of managing vineyards in the Napa and Sacramento valleys.

Clay Shannon says Lake County's reputation for selling bulk wine held it back -- until an economic crisis pushed it forward.

"Mondavi, K-J (Kendall-Jackson) and Beringer reduced their grape contracts, and that made us a region," he says.

Growers were left with the high-volume, bulk wine grapes and diminishing sales revenues, particularly as Napa and Sonoma vineyards returned to production after recovering from the phylloxera insect that ravaged vineyards in the early to mid-1990s.

Shannon said the Lake County growers took a look at their farming options, sought out winemakers looking for a challenge and started to make their own wines. And so Lake County as a wine region was born. "Otherwise," says Shannon, "we'd have just continued to be a North Coast blend, supplying grapes."

## **Land available**

When Kaj Ahlmann wanted to invest in vineyards, the Dane initially looked in Napa County, where vineyards are small and price tags are large. On a whim, Ahlmann jumped the county line to Lake County and found 4,300 acres of land that looks into Napa Valley's eastern vineyards from his Six Sigma Ranch and Vineyard, near the southeast side of the lake.

There is so much land, and so few jobs in Lake County, that the county is doing what it can to bolster this sudden interest from visitors attracted by the area's wines.

The Lake County Board of Supervisors is promoting agritourism with approval for tasting rooms, inns, bed-and-breakfasts, restaurants and spas.

The concept is not to be like Napa Valley, with its upscale tasting rooms positioned cheek by jowl along Highway 29 and the Silverado Trail. After all, Lake County has only nine stoplights. The biggest project, already well under way, is from Jim Fetzer, whose family was instrumental in the development of Mendocino County's wine industry. Fetzer's Ceago Vinegarden is on Clear Lake's north shore, near Nice.

"As far as I know, this is the only winery in the country where you can boat up and go tasting," says Fetzer, whose vineyards, olive groves, gardens and vegetable plots are farmed biodynamically. (Biodynamic farming is an organic and holistic approach to maintaining plants in tune with cycles of the sun, moon and seasons.)

Fetzer's \$150 million development will be a shoreline resort centered on food and wine. A tasting room, winery, gardens and boat dock are already open, and a restaurant, spa and cottages are also under construction. A hotel and condominiums are also planned to be amid the vineyards.

Not everyone is going the mega-tourism route. Karen and Michael Noggle left Napa Valley for a 6-acre vineyard near the village of Clearlake Oaks. Michael Noggle had a lot of experience as a vineyard developer and had been an avid home winemaker for years.

This year, the Noggles have developed their Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard, opened a small winery with weekend tastings and bottled their first vintage, a powerful 2003 Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon.

"We will never be big; we're boutique. But we are working hard and the wines are doing well," says Michael Noggle, whose Noggle Vineyards and Winery wine is available through direct sales and beginning to appear on restaurant lists.

## **Crest of the wave**

An early arrival in Lake County's new wave of wineries is Jacqueline Dharmapalan's Monte Lago Vineyards and Winery. Dharmapalan bought a 500-acre property on the crest of the mountain ridge between Clear Lake and High Valley in 1995. The winery's 2000 release was the winery's -- and the High Valley appellation's -- first wine. Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Petite Sirah and Syrah are among the red varieties for her estate-grown, single-vineyard wines.

Shannon, who maintains vineyards for Monte Lago, said, "The Napa Valley recipe just doesn't work up here." Napa Valley's largely flat land has fertile and easy-to-maintain vineyards of primarily Cabernet Sauvignon. "The climate (in Lake County) is extremely dry and the volcanic soils hold no water. The heat is of the warmer-climate grape-growing world -- Tempranillo, Barbera and Petite Sirah. We will hang our hat on (the Petite Sirah) variety."

Midday temperatures can top 100 degrees in the summer, yet at night drop by 40 to 70 degrees, starting with afternoon winds from the lake and from an unusual east-west wind that traverses High Valley. This extreme swing in temperatures lengthens the ripening period, resulting in enhanced flavors in the grapes.

As viticultural regions around the world begin to heat up because of climate change, their night temperatures are at risk of becoming too warm for optimum grape-growing, according to studies by the International Panel on Climate Change. As a result, mountain vineyards around the world, like in Lake County, are becoming hot commodities.

Jerry Brassfield is no newcomer to Lake County. He bought the Brassfield Estate ranch 30 years ago, way up from the lake in High Valley. Back then it was a family refuge and cattle ranch. In the late 1990s, Brassfield, a former owner of Felton Empire winery, in Felton in Santa Cruz County, decided to go with wine grapes. He built a winery and has plans for caves, a tasting room, luxury accommodations and a restaurant.

Ahlmann is taking a more wildland approach with Six Sigma. Vineyard plantings are essentially islands on the vast ranch. He has dedicated a portion of the land to a conservancy trust for hiking and the preservation of fauna and flora and will feature docent-led geology and history tours. Ahlmann's vineyards, like most other large ranches in Lake County, are designed with wildlife corridors, so paths for deer, boar, elk, bears and the occasional mountain lion aren't blocked by vineyard trellises. The Six Sigma vines are young, and the winery is a work in progress, with expanded caves and a tasting room under construction. Accommodations are also under way. Though he has no plans for a restaurant, he hopes the increased interest will draw more sophisticated eating possibilities to the area.

### Land with potential

In Guenoc Valley, on the Napa-Lake counties' border, Lillie Langtry Estate and Vineyards president Roy Cecchetti, a former owner of negociant Cecchetti-Sebastiani Cellar's, says the potential for great Lake County wines was always there. The winery has been producing wines for 25 years under the Guenoc label. This winery, too, is undergoing changes, with new management, new vineyards and a new focus on Petite Sirah and Sauvignon Blanc.

But just because wine grape intelligentsia -- the mountain vineyard pioneers such as Shannon, the long-term wine investors and creators led by Steele, and, increasingly, businessmen like Beckstoffer, Ahlmann and Brassfield -- is discovering Lake County, is the region's wine worth it? The trouble it takes to create vineyards in such difficult terrain and creating wine from lesser-known grape varieties, such as Petite Sirah, Mourvedre, Viognier, Tempranillo, only means something if consumers like the taste.

"Fine wine is real for the first time in Lake County. In the past, Lake County's impression was it was cheap or part of a blend," says Dennis Krep, who buys his Lake County grapes from Shannon for the Two Angels brand. "Now it's varietal discovery time."

Snows Lake Vineyard's Adriance adds, "The use of these 'new' grapes in quality wines will ultimately determine our long-term success as a wine-growing region."

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### What's Where in Lake County

As Lake County's wine identity develops, so does the desire to create distinct American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) based on each region's geography and geology, weather, and history. Here are snapshots of the AVAs, or appellations, for grapes from Lake County. Use this as a cheat sheet for touring the region.

On July 29 and 30, more than a dozen wineries will be open to the public for the Second Annual Wine Adventure Weekend. For more information, go to [www.lakecountywinetours.com](http://www.lakecountywinetours.com).

**North Coast:** With 3 million acres, North Coast is the second-largest AVA in California, created in 1983, and includes vineyards in Lake, Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, Marin and Solano counties.

**Lake County:** This designation appears on labels to identify the grapes' origin but is not an AVA. There is talk of making it an appellation, but until then, it is largely used as a synonym for the Clear Lake appellation.

**Clear Lake:** The 13th largest AVA in California, Clear Lake surrounds California's largest natural lake. Within its 168,960 acres are the Red Hills Lake County AVA, most of the High Valley appellation, and Big Valley, a 31-square-mile area (not an AVA) where much of the county's bulk wine is grown. The Clear Lake appellation was created in 1984 when grapes were grown solely to supplement blends for wineries outside the county, a practice that continues today.

**Benmore Valley:** The smallest appellation in Lake County, Benmore Valley is located in a mountain dip on the Lake-Mendocino county line, north of the Hopland Grade. The 300 acres of vines in the 1,440-acre AVA supply Geyser Peak Winery.

**Guenoc Valley:** The nation's first one-owner AVA was created in 1981. Hawaii's Malulani Investments acquired the property in 1963, built a winery and planted vineyards.

**High Valley:** Lake County's newest AVA, High Valley has the first cluster of consumer-friendly wineries in a single area. Vineyards within the 14,000-acre AVA range from 1,600 to more than 3,000 feet altitude in a volcanic mountain-rimmed bowl. Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Zinfandel, Merlot, Petite Sirah and Tempranillo vineyards are planted on ridges of brick-red volcanic cinders and pumice-like gravel. Cooler-weather varieties including Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio and Pinot Noir are also planted in the valley. An unusual east-west traverse wind

combined with cool winds sweeping up from Clear Lake means temperatures in High Valley can swing 50 to 70 degrees in a single July or August day.

Red Hills Lake County: This appellation, created in 2004, is red grape country. The name includes Lake County to distinguish it from a Red Hills area in Oregon. Ninety percent of the vineyards of this 31,250-acre AVA are planted on shockingly red volcanic rocks and dust. The AVA blankets the foothills of 4,300-foot Mount Konocti. About 3,000 acres are planted, most since 1999. Cabernet Sauvignon is by far the primary grape with small plots of Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, Cabernet Franc, Sangiovese and other reds.

-- Kathleen Buckley

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## A Taste of Lake County

A two-day tasting of 82 white and red wines made it clear that Sauvignon Blanc reigns in the white category. Location is everything for the reds; several varietals shine.

### *White and rosé wines*

2005 Ceago Vinegarden Clear Lake Del Lago Syrah Rosé (\$18) A delicate, superfresh rosé from Jim Fetzer's new lakeside biodynamic vineyards. Light, crisp raspberry fruit flavors and a lovely salmon color. There's acidity, balanced with a poised, soft aftertaste.

2005 Gregory Graham Rolling Knolls Vineyard Red Hills Lake County Sauvignon Blanc (\$16) From Graham's new winery, this is on the crisp and herbaceous side of the Sauvignon Blanc flavor spectrum. That makes it a food-friendly wine, with its grapefruit and citrus taste.

2005 Guenoc Lake County Sauvignon Blanc (\$12) A fine, fresh, typically herbaceous wine from Langtry Estate and Vineyards (formerly Guenoc). With a light touch from winemaker Bob Broman, the wine folds acidity into grapefruit and green plum flavors. Just to fill it out, there is light creaminess that goes down well.

2003 Monte Lago Vineyards and Winery Clear Lake Sauvignon Blanc (\$13) This is one of the few Lake County wood-aged Sauvignon Blancs, from Jacqueline Dharmapalan's spectacularly positioned mountain estate in High Valley. It's toasty and full bodied, with almond paste and crisp green flavors to finish.

2005 Six Sigma Ranch and Vineyards Rooster Vineyards Lake County Sauvignon Blanc (\$20) Kaj Ahlmann's second vintage from his remote southeast Lake County ranch is Loire-like in style. The consulting winemaker is Denis Malbec, ex-cellar master of Bordeaux's Chateau Latour. With its grassy aroma, mineral character, flavors of white grapefruit and lime, and brisk acidity, this hits the spot.

2005 Two Angels High Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$17) A deliciously green, fresh, crisp wine, made from grapes from the High Valley vineyards of Clay Shannon. It's light, with a grapefruit and mineral taste.

### *Red wines*

2003 Brassfield Estate Monte Sereno Vineyard High Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40) A powerfully concentrated wine drawn from the elegant intensity of the dry black currant flavors, the perfumed violets, the dry tannins, and the complex layer of wood tastes. The result: a wine that demands a fine meal.

2002 Guenoc Lake County Petite Sirah (\$18) A signature wine for Guenoc, this is juicy, ripe and fruity, with spice, pepper and red berry flavors.

2004 Obsidian Ridge Red Hills Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25) At 3,000 feet, the Molnar family's obsidian vineyard is a contender for the highest vineyard in Lake County. A delicious, mineral, perfumed, spicy wine that is packed with soft, ripe, black berry fruits. Great acidity gives it all shape.

2004 Rosenblum Cellars Snows Lake Vineyard Red Hills Lake County Zinfandel (\$35) With intense fruit from the Snows Lake Vineyard, it may be high in alcohol (at 15.5 percent), but thanks to the Rosenblum Cellars touch, it doesn't taste like it. The balance is the key: deliciously ripe fruit, concentrated black fruit flavors, layers of herbs and tannins.

2004 Steele Wines Writer's Block Lake County Cabernet Franc (\$14) What a bargain price for this impressively perfumed wine (83 percent Cabernet Franc, 3 percent Syrah, 14 percent Merlot). It has raisin, fruitcake and herbal flavors that partner with the ripe blueberry. To finish, dry tannins bind it all together.

-- Kathleen Buckley

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