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Lake County, Napa's Neighbor, Gains Respect

By LETTIE TEAGUE



Lianne Milton

CHEERS FOR THE LAKERS | Arpad and Peter Molnar, owners, and Alex Beloz, winemaker at the Obsidian Ridge Vineyard

NEAR THE END of the Civil War, the U.S. government gave away 160 acres of land to anyone willing to help settle the West. Vineyard owner Andy Beckstoffer has his own version of that Homestead Act: He has offered famous winemakers and vintners a free trip by helicopter to California's Lake County to check out his vineyards—along with "favorable terms" for the purchase of grapes.

Mr. Beckstoffer is one of the largest—not to mention most enterprising—vineyard developers in the county. He owns about 1,000 acres in Lake County and about the same amount of land in Mendocino and Napa counties. But right now Mr. Beckstoffer is particularly focused on Lake County, which he believes has the potential to produce some very good, very reasonably priced Cabernet. And he's not alone; almost two months ago, the Gallo family made a very big commitment to the county with the purchase of the 2,000-acre Snows Lake Vineyard, whose 800 acres of vineyards are primarily planted to Cabernet Sauvignon. According to Gallo Senior Vice President Roger Nabedian, it's the largest purchase that Gallo has made in at least 10 years, in terms of both money and size.

In its pre-Prohibition heyday, there were close to 3,000 acres of vineyards in Lake County, and its lakefront resorts attracted top Hollywood acts. But over the years, the vineyards were almost entirely ripped out and replaced by more-profitable walnuts and pears (and the top acts all migrated to Lake Tahoe). By the 1980s, the walnut and pear markets had dried up as well, and Lake County's economy—and profile—declined even more.

But the past 10 years have been a time of resurgence and regrowth. There are now more than 8,000 acres of vineyards in Lake County and a few dozen wineries as well. (A few decades ago there were just four.) Five subappellations were drawn up, most notably Red Hills, Clear Lake and High Valley. According to Mr. Beckstoffer, these subdistricts were created by growers as much to recognize their distinctive geography as to distance themselves from the less-than-illustrious Lake County name. "Lake County had a reputation for bad wine in the 1990s," said Mr. Beckstoffer, naming the decade he first ventured north from Napa.



Nick Elias

Andy Beckstoffer's Amber Knolls Vineyard

One of the reasons that the wines were so bad was the grapes were planted in "all the wrong places," according to Mr. Beckstoffer—an opinion I heard expressed several more times from several more growers during my visit last month. The grapes—particularly Cabernet—were planted down in the valleys instead of up in the hills, and the fruit didn't ripen properly. Valley wines also lacked the intensity of wines made from hillside fruit. Not that most wine drinkers had an opportunity to distinguish the difference between the two as most Lake County grapes were added to blends of various grapes from various places, including Napa Valley.

Mr. Beckstoffer and I had this conversation on the way to Steele Wines, one of the earliest wineries of modern Lake County, founded by Jed Steele in 1991. Mr. Steele was the much-heralded creator of Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay but left fame and fortune behind when he moved to Lake County and opened a decidedly low-key place of his own. The Steele winery is a world apart from his past corporate life, which is to say it's quintessential Lake County: a low-slung building just off of the highway, across from a purveyor of farm

equipment and pet food.

Although many growers, including Mr. Beckstoffer, believe that Cabernet Sauvignon will make Lake County respectable if not renowned, others, like Mr. Steele, seem to believe that the right grape for Lake County is...everything. Mr. Steele turns out a veritable alphabet of wines—from Aligote to Zinfandel and just about every varietal in between. But not all of his fruit comes from Lake County—sometimes it's from places as far away as Washington state.



Other winemakers have backed other varietals, most notably Sauvignon Blanc or, in the case of Gregory Graham, Viognier. In fact, Mr. Graham, a Lake County pioneer, told me he thought Viognier would "rule the world" in the late 1990s. Although his Viognier is very good, that never happened, and Mr. Graham makes many other wines as well—Cabernet, Grenache, Chardonnay and Syrah.

Sonoma-based superstar winemaker David Ramey, who consults to Brassfield Winery, in Upper Lake, believes that aromatic white wines like Albariño, Gewürztraminer and Roussane are the right grapes for Lake County. And he's quite keen on Malbec, too. That red varietal has a "tremendous future" in the county, said Mr. Ramey, though there are only 25 acres of Malbec in Lake County right now.

If the absolute best Lake County grapes have yet to be determined, they are, at least, still quite reasonably priced. For example, Mr. Beckstoffer charges at least

\$8,000 a ton for grapes from his top Napa Cabernet vineyard, while at his Red Hills outpost in Lake (which he farms exactly the same way), the cost is \$2,500 a ton for Cabernet. The Lake County average is \$1,800.

And yet only about a third of the winemakers buying Mr. Beckstoffer's fruit are making Cabernets with a Red Hills label, he estimates. Most, like winemaker Dave Guffy of the Hess Collection in Napa, are using it in blends. (Mr. Guffy uses 45% Lake County fruit in his Hess Select red.) The same is true for other growers—Gregory Graham estimates that he sells 60% of his fruit to Napa Valley wineries who bottle it into a blend. (A wine may be labeled "Napa" as long as 85% of the fruit is from there.)

Peter Molnar, chairman of the Lake County Wine Grape Commission, makes wine in Lake County as well as Napa and Sonoma and showcases Lake County with his wine, Obsidian Ridge. His 2009 is a wine he calls "a hillside Cabernet for the rest of us," priced accordingly at \$28 a bottle. Marked by dark fruit, currant and tobacco, it's intense and impressive - one of the best Cabernets I tasted on my visit.

Like many of the producers I met during my visit, Mr. Molnar doesn't live in the county, but several hours away in North Berkeley. Others commute from Sonoma and Napa. That's another big challenge for Lake County - finding winemakers who actually want to live there. Even though an acre of land costs a fraction of what it does in Napa (about \$10,000 plus the cost of developing a vineyard), there hasn't exactly been a stampede of would-be resident vintners. Maybe it's just a matter of time - and a few more good wines in the market with Lake County on their labels. After all, it took not one but three Homestead Acts to get the West settled.