

WINERY OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

pine, and oak. The economy has always revolved around farming, its crops rotating with the times, with pear and walnut orchards declining while viticulture has expanded and now provides the largest crop with 9,000 planted acres.

A major grape grower in the county, Clay Shannon owns 1,000 acres and has planted 700. "We didn't get into the wine business to be a winery," Clay says. "We're growers, true grape growers," selling fruit to both "large guys and small guys," among them Constellation Brands, Mondavi, Beringer, Kendall-Jackson, Kenwood, Gerard, Pride Mountain, Steel Wines, Stags Leap, Gallo, Benziger, and Charles Krug. But grape growers are farming a perishable commodity. "That's scary," he says. And in this economy they might not be able to sell all of their production. Making wine is a way of gaining more control over their businesses. Now at 60,000 cases, Clay says that his goal is to produce 250,000 cases a year and at the same time sell fruit to a few wineries that he likes working with.

The other reason that Lake County is an obscure wine region is that 80 to 90 percent of its grapes are purchased by Napa and Sonoma wineries, which blend the fruit into their own wines. So consumers remain unaware not only of the quality of Lake County fruit but also of its very existence in a given bottle. "One of the reasons that we're in the wine business is that we can't continue to be the blend, because the blend has no value," Clay explains. In other words, 75 percent of the wine must be made from fruit grown in Napa or any other county when that county is named on the label of a bottle, but 25 percent can be grown elsewhere although the consumer has no way of knowing where. So

developing its own wineries is the way that a particular area develops its reputation, not just from growing grapes, and until now, Lake County has had too few wineries to attract much attention.

Clay believes that Napa and Sonoma Counties would like to see Lake County remain inconspicuous. The price of grapes is driven by supply and demand. If demand and fruit prices were to increase, wineries from outside Lake County would have a harder time doing business there. "People like myself and Jed Steele and quite a few others, who are building wine brands and taking them out into the national market place, are creating a following for Lake County wines. Two of the largest wine retailers in California, Trader Joes and Beverages and More, will tell you that they recognize Lake County as the up and coming brand. Three years ago, they did not."

Clay says that the quality of Lake County grapes improved dramatically 14 years ago when farmers started to plant on the bench lands and in the hills. Those vineyards are now producing excellent fruit. Earlier, farmers had planted in flat areas, which Clay says are fine for Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and Merlot. But Cabernet, Zinfandel, and Petite Sirah among other reds are showing true varietal character at these higher elevations. Unlike the coastal counties, Lake County has no fog to cool vineyards during the growing season, but wind provides the same function. During the day, the land heats more quickly than lake waters, and the divergent temperatures generate cooling wind. In the evening, cold air sinks down from the mountains to cool vineyards and prolong the growing season,

which in turn gives fruit the time to develop intense flavor.

Clay and Margarita Shannon own some of the most beautiful vineyards in California, perched on ridges as high as 2,200 feet elevations with views of the lake and the mountains. Instead of herbicides, Clay employs sheep to weed the vineyards and uses organic oils and sulfurs to control mildew and mites while encouraging natural predators like ladybugs, snakes, and owls to eliminate vineyard pests. To conserve water evaporation, he irrigates at night and closely monitors moisture content in the soil so as not to over-water. At the same time, he preserves brush piles as habitat for birds and leaves corridors in the vineyards for migrating animals.

Although Lake County has struggled to provide inviting restaurants and hotels for visitors, it's slowly developing accommodations that, along with winery tasting rooms, are enticing visitors to experience this oasis in the mountains. "This summer will be awesome up here. The lake is full, fuller than I've seen in years. And there are nice little restaurants here and there." Clay recommends Boar's Breath in Middletown, the Saw Shop in Kelseyville, and Rob Roy's on Cobb Mountain. On the lake, he likes Water Color and Zeno's Restaurant and Inn. At Upper Lake, Tallman Hotel has just opened near the Blue Wing Saloon. At Lakeport he enjoys Park Place. The names come slowly because Clay explains that he eats mostly at home with his family. "If you don't want a bunch of traffic and don't want to stand in line at a tasting room, then come up here. If you need a Star Bucks drive-through, then don't come. There aren't any. Here people welcome you and are happy to see you. It's a special spot."



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The Wonders of Lake County *Shannon Ridge Vineyards & Winery*

When Sonoma County's largest newspaper, the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, recently ran a front page story that disparaged high unemployment and foreclosure rates in neighboring Lake County, implying that too many residents were less than responsible, Clay Shannon was outraged. He felt that the story unfairly targeted his community, and as he wrote in his lengthy letter to the editor, the article made him "red-faced" and "angry," and above all, "ready to defend the county" where he lived. The Shannon Ridge website is unusual in that it lists a five-point code of ethics to explain company culture. In one way or another, the Press Democrat had probably violated all five dictums in what Clay considered an irresponsible article. Tell the truth; take pride in work; honor a deal; be loyal to the brand through hard work and fair treatment of others; and talk less. "We are doers, not talkers," the site explains. So in defense of Lake County and

his own sense of ethics, Clay Shannon publically made his impassioned case that the County had spectacular natural beauty and abundant wild life, the largest lake in California, pristine air, growing tourism, and finally some of the best vineyards in California, which in the interest of balance and fairness, Clay felt, the Press Democrat story should not have ignored.

But in truth, the attributes of Lake County are ignored by many because the area is without easy access even from the contiguous counties of Napa and Sonoma and certainly from the rest of the San Francisco Bay Area. Narrow country roads wind up to an elevation of 1,400 feet where Clear Lake stretches 23 miles across its basin, rimmed by volcanic Mount Konocti, its five distinct peaks rising to 4,300 feet at the highest point. The panorama is almost mystical in its beauty. Mountains and valleys undulate across the spectrum and are furnished with redwood,

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