

REGION OF THE MONTH



WINERY from cover

to the wines, I think that's the critical piece to our success so far. We're seeing a slow-down in sales, but it's not tremendous. We have an unquestionable gain in quality, and I think that's attributed to learning my craft and doing what I do better, but also learning to get out of the way of these vineyards that we've planted, letting them do what they do best, which is shine.

Let's talk about the Lake County vineyard.

I've got the Matter Lake vineyard in Lake County, and we're going to continue to draw fruit from La Herradura Vineyard in Napa. I have a 10-year contract with them. So we're secure there. Lake County is beginning to be a significant player on the wine scene. We have 160 gross acres there, of which 45 are planted. We have more to go. It's just a matter of cash flow. I planted another 1.5 acres two years ago. All the trellising came in this year because the vines were growing up, and we took a little bit of fruit off the new vines this year. The older section is nine years-old, planted in 2000. The mature vines are equally divided between Syrah, Zinfandel, and a little Grenache. That site is done so well. It's really exciting, and what's also exciting is that there's a real momentum in Lake County with the quality of the wines. We're seeing better and better players buying vineyards up there.

The older producers in Lake County are Steele Winery and the Langtry Estate.

Steele's been up there for a long time. But they're a lot of old Napa families, who have vineyards in Lake County and who are growing grapes to lower their cost basis for their Napa or Sonoma wines and never really focus on the County. Some of the older vineyards, especially up in the higher elevations, are Bartolucci and Beringer Family for example.

I was blown away by the beauty of the area, including the drive up from Napa.

It is extraordinary, one of the most beautiful places in the world. When I first got up there, I had started growing grapes and didn't pay a lot of attention to what was on the horizon. But eventually, I got my head up out of the dirt and realized that this place is really pretty. What's going on geologically up there is that it's right on the edge of the Pacific and Continental plates, where there's been massive magma or lava intrusions and lots of new soil. It's one of the places where a lot of the parent material for the red dirt that's sought after in Sonoma and Napa counties came from. Over a period of a million to ten million years, something like that, there was a lot of volcanic activity and massive explosions and huge mountains turning into dust. And a lot of the sought-after volcanic soils in Sonoma and Napa blew down wind from the northeast to the southwest and landed in the valleys. So those soils up there in Lake County are new, very young. You can sort of feel their newness in the wines.

Why haven't winemakers paid more attention to the area?

The economic impetus just hasn't been there, but that's beginning to change. You really can't get your foot in the door in Napa anymore. I was fortunate to have an in. Without it, I would never have been able to farm there. I think you're seeing inquisitive, intelligent people coming up, looking for what they can't get in Napa or Sonoma or even Mendocino for that matter. Some of the best minds are looking around up there and trying to figure out how to make better and better wine. And they're making wines, not just competitive with Napa but in some cases better. For the most part, Mediterranean varietals thrive in Lake County. If you think about that climate in the Fertile Crescent around the Med-

iterranean, you've got this warm body of water, not cold like the Pacific Ocean, that radiates heat and keeps temperatures pretty warm day and night in the summer. It's not extreme, but you get up into the Languedoc and parts of Spain, it's scorching hot all the time, and it's hot at night too. Those varieties from that part of the world seem to thrive here, Tempranillo being one of them. Grenache seems to be doing tremendously well too.

Spain is developing a market for its native grapes here and maybe inspiring California winemakers.

A lot of guys jumped on the bandwagon in the last ten years. We were one of the first. Grenache is also a Spanish variety although it's grown all over the South of France. Grenache Blanc and Mourvedre are also Spanish varietals. But in five or ten years, everybody is going to be making Tempranillo. Everybody is making it already. Australia has planted tons of it, and I think with the warming climate, if that's what we're going to see, and I think we are, these varieties are going to be the varieties that will carry California into the next century. I think there will be small pockets where Cabernet will continue to thrive, and maybe Napa will be one of those places. But in the grand sorting out of things, you'll see marginal areas within the Napa area, where land is less expensive, where people will be willing to plant Syrah instead of Cabernet. I think, in effect, that appellations are getting established in America just on merit alone where the reward for growing Cabernet is such, and the reward for growing Tempranillo is this. People are self-selecting different grape varieties instead of being mandated by what has been growing in a certain area. I think that the next 20 or 30 years, if we're going to see climate change, there's going to be a shift in what people plant, and I think people are going to plant grapes that they would never have considered before.

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YOUR ACCESS TO OUTSTANDING WINES FROM CALIFORNIA AND ITALY

California Winery of the Month



Transplants from Spain & France Spencer-Roloson

Partners in life and in business, winemaker Sam Spencer and strategic marketer Wendy Roloson started their company in 1998. Eleven years later, they have a solid focus that relates to their tastes but also to their vineyard locations in Napa and Lake counties. "Our focus relates to this sweep of territory that comes from Rioja in central Spain and around into the Rhone in France. We have placed ourselves on that continuum. We're drilling down with these varietals and establishing a house style that is unmistakable and being rewarded for it," Sam says. Until recently, they were partners in a family owned vineyard on the lower slopes of Howell Mountain in Napa County's Conn Valley. Since the property recently sold, they are concentrating on farming their 160-acre Madder Lake estate in Lake County, located above Napa, directly north of Mount St. Helena in the craggy Mayacamas mountain range.

Lake County is distinguished by its high elevation, 1,400 feet on the valley floor, and by Clear Lake, the largest body of fresh water in California. Its economy has always revolved around farming, and the crop that's getting the most attention now is winegrapes. Sam and Wendy are especially enthusiastic about French Syrah and Viognier and Spanish Tempranillo and the grapes that the two countries grow in common, Grenache, Grenache

Blanc, Mourvedre, and Carignane, because these varietals seem to prosper in Lake County. They also make California's own Zinfandel and a little Cabernet Sauvignon. "It's not the standard path," Sam says. "We're not trying to be a big Napa Cab producer at \$150 a bottle. We're making Cab, but it has a Spanish feel because it's blended with Tempranillo and Grenache. I think we've turned on a lot of people with these idiosyncratic wines, and we're going to continue to make them." I recap our conversation here with minor editing for clarity and length.

You hit a rough spot after 9/11, and you're in another one now.

Oh, exactly if for no other reason than all the competition that's out there. And the wine business is also a sector of the luxury economy that lots of money has flown into over the last 20 years. You've got people who want to be in the business for a host of different reasons from the most orthodox, straight forward business reasons to make money to all kinds of fabulous ideas about what the business is really like. I think there's no shortage of people who are mounting an assault on the castle. But focusing on quality, focusing on agriculture, on farming, on the wine-growing reality, and trying to let the vineyard speak through

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CelebrationsWineClub.com

Anna Maria Knapp, Owner
75 Pelican Way G1
San Rafael, CA 94901

1-800-700-6227

Celebrate@
CelebrationsWineClub.com

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