

AIR APPARENT



Grower **Andy Beckstoffer**, with
 a painting of his Beckstoffer
 Red Hills Vineyard.

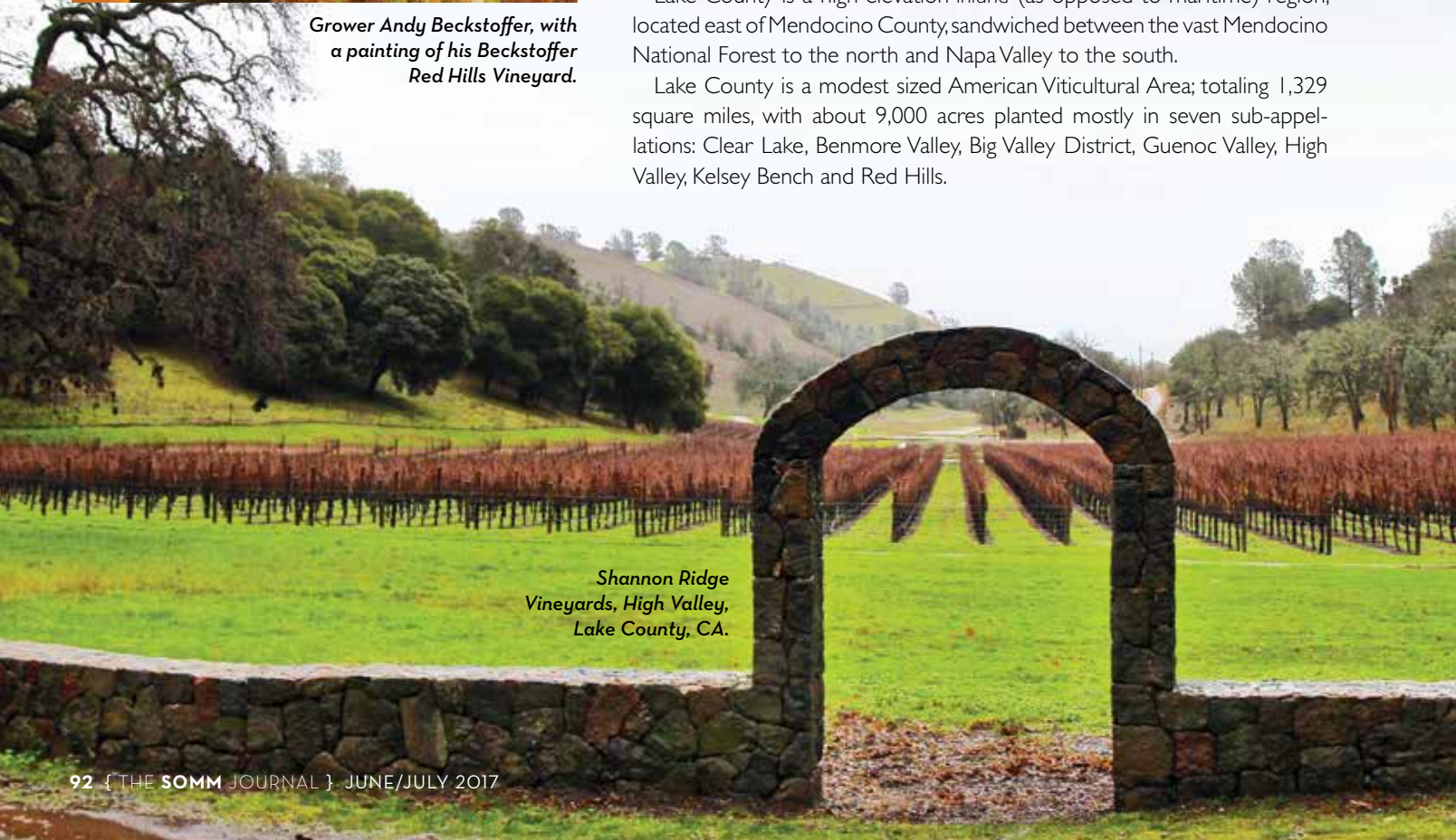
WITH THE CLEANEST AIR IN CALIFORNIA,
LAKE COUNTY COMES ON STRONG WITH
 HIGH-ELEVATION RED VARIETALS

story and photos by Randy Caparoso

WORLD-CLASS wine begins with world class terroir; which is why *The Somm Journal's* Lake County Somm Camp—taking place in early June 2017 and co-sponsored by the Lake County Winegrape Commission—may prove to be our most eye-opening excursion yet. Some salient facts:

Lake County is a high-elevation *inland* (as opposed to maritime) region, located east of Mendocino County, sandwiched between the vast Mendocino National Forest to the north and Napa Valley to the south.

Lake County is a modest sized American Viticultural Area; totaling 1,329 square miles, with about 9,000 acres planted mostly in seven sub-appellations: Clear Lake, Benmore Valley, Big Valley District, Guenoc Valley, High Valley, Kelsey Bench and Red Hills.



*Shannon Ridge
 Vineyards, High Valley,
 Lake County, CA.*



Clay Shannon of Shannon Ridge Vineyards with an 1880s Mission "mother vine" found on his estate.

Lake County's cool-climate terroir is largely centered around the moderating influence of Clear Lake, California's largest and oldest body of water (68 square miles), sitting at an altitude of 1,329 feet; most of the region's vineyards are planted between 1,500 and 3,000 feet.

Since the 1980s Lake County has practically owned California Sauvignon Blanc as a signature grape; but the big news is the powerful yet balanced (high acids/moderate alcohols/concentrated phenols) red wines now being grown primarily from red Bordeaux varieties—perhaps most significantly, in Red Hills (rolling hills of red volcanic soils at the foot of Mount Konocti, at elevations up to 3,000 feet) and High Valley (with its combination of volcanic slopes, alluvial fans and benches at 1,600 to 3,000 feet).

When planning our Lake County Somm Camp itinerary, we met with Andy Beckstoffer; the legendary grower who was Founding Director and past President of the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association as well as the Rutherford Dust Society. There is a reason why Beckstoffer has made a huge commitment (1,300 planted acres) to Lake County's Red Hills. Says Beckstoffer, "This is **the** place for Cabernet Sauvignon . . . the volcanic soils, mountain temperatures, the sheer quality of sunlight, or what the French call luminosity—all the ingredients are here for unsurpassed quality, which we are already seeing in the wines."

Gregory Graham established his own Gregory Graham Wines estate in 2000 following a Napa Valley experience, primarily as Rombauer Vineyard's head winemaker. Says Graham, "I planted in the Red Hills because there is no site in California as unique, especially for Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Grenache and Syrah.

"One key aspect is the oblique sunlight we get on our north-facing slopes, facing Clear Lake. At the elevation of most vineyards planted here (2,000 to 3,000 feet), fog is not a factor. What **is** a factor is the clarity of our air—for several years now, Lake County's air has been rated the cleanest in the nation. So what we get are warm days without an excessive amount of heat, yet our sunlight is intense and constant.

"For every 1,000 feet here, you get three percent more ultraviolet light, which is critical for berry formation and breaking down of pyrazines. For Bordeaux and Rhône grapes especially, higher UV helps trigger thicker grape skins, and increased tannins and phenols, leading to more intensely flavored wines. That intensity is what you consistently find in



Gregory Graham, owner-grower-winemaker of Gregory Graham Wines.



Peter Molnar shows off the obsidian rocks inundating his Obsidian Ridge Vineyards.

our wines.”

Peter Molnar—who farms his Obsidian Ridge Vineyard on a Red Hills site replete with black, glassy obsidian shards and rocks—tells us: “Many sommeliers, like consumers, may be jaded by West Coast wines, but these vineyards are not just new, they’re crazy different.”

Adds Molnar, “Cabernet Sauvignon is by far the most widely planted varietal in Lake County, although all the red Bordeaux and Rhône grapes are spectacular here. The reds express their own unique, cool-temperature, high-chaparral environment. There is a distinctive taste in the wines—suggesting the pines, oaks and manzanita—to go along with the concentrated colors, tannin and phenolics. The closest thing to the combination of power and terroir found in Lake County reds is probably Ridge’s Monte Bello—only we are growing in the country’s clearest air!”

A sampling of Lake County’s power and clarity:

Gregory Graham 2015 Windrem Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc, Big Valley-Lake County (SRP \$20) This vineyard is singled out in this bottling because it is consistently one of the finest in the broader appellation. Z-quadrilateral trellising engenders the bright, fruit focused (rather than

green herbaceousness) nose of lemon/lime, avocado and honeydew; and a lemony tart, light feeling medium body freshens the palate with razor precision.

High Valley Vineyard 2014 Petite Sirah, High Valley-Lake County (SRP \$30) Extreme concentration comes naturally to this bottling by the Shannon Ridge Family of Wines. Opaque black-purple colors and concentrated blueberry focus; big (14.7% alcohol) yet rounded in generous, cohesive tannin and fruit.



Winemaker Matt Hughes of Brassfield Estate Winery.

Brassfield Estate 2012 Syrah, Monte Sereno Vineyard, High Valley-Lake County (SRP \$35) Concentrated purplish-black color and violet perfume, with fennel-sausage spice and smoked meat sensations

pushing through a roly-poly, dense yet supple, buoyant palate-feel (the latter, a signature of consulting winemaker David Ramey).

Obsidian Ridge Vineyard 2013 Estate Grown Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Hills-Lake County (SRP \$30) It’s no exaggeration to say that this would be at least a \$75 wine in other appellations (Napa Valley, Santa Cruz Mountains or even Paso Robles). The black mountain fruit is luxurious and concentrated; the tannin core, a steely fist; the layered feel, velvety and suave; yet with pungently wild scrub-like, almost sandalwood-ish spice sensations unlike that of any other Cabernet Sauvignons, except others grown in Lake County.

Six Sigma 2013 Tempranillo Reserve, Lake County (SRP \$48) This estate’s 1,700-foot elevation Diamond Mine Vineyard has proven to be a dynamite site for this grape since a first vintage in 2005. Red cherry/blueberry fragrances rise above suede glove, cigarbox and dried kitchen herb aromas, sweetened with restrained French oak; dense, velvety, taut and medium-full bodied on the palate. *\$*

Watch for the full story on our Lake County Somm Camp in the August-September issue.



Six Sigma Ranch owner Kaj Ahlmann (foreground) and his son, VP Christian Ahlmann, in their 1,700-foot-elevation Diamond Mine Vineyard.