

{ winery spotlight }

A New High for HERZOG Wine Cellars

CAMEL BACK RIDGE VINEYARD IN
LAKE COUNTY, CA, REPRESENTS
THE WINERY'S RECENT EVOLUTION

BY
RANDY
CAPAROSO

*A view of Camel Back Ridge
Vineyard in the shadow of Mount
Konocti in the Red Hills AVA.*

PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

Large obsidian rocks were removed from the landscape when the Camel Back Ridge Vineyard was planted in 2020.



Standing halfway up Herzog Wine Cellars' newly planted hillside vineyard on the edge of Lake County, California's Red Hills AVA—practically in the shadow of dormant volcano Mount Konocti—David Galzignato, who serves as Herzog's director of winemaking and operations, recognized the pedigree of his surroundings when I met with him this past June. "When the sun hits the obsidian gravel just right, it gives the topsoil [the illusion of] movement, like a black wave traveling the length of the vineyard," he said.

Obsidian—a shimmeringly black, crystallized volcanic glass—does not directly contribute minerals beneficial to grapevines. But it is indicative of soil series that are highly conducive to quality winegrowing. "We're sitting at about a half-mile elevation, 2,200 to 2,600 feet," said David Weiss, the site's vineyard manager. "These are well-drained, gravelly volcanic soils. There is a northeast aspect . . . ideal for good air drainage, minimizing afternoon sun. Accordingly, we configured the row orientation [from] southwest to northeast at a 45-degree angle off true north—ideal for speckled light infiltration and afternoon sun protection."



Herzog director of winemaking and operations David Galzignato inspects Cabernet Sauvignon vines in the Camel Back Ridge Vineyard.

Weiss continued, “This was virgin ground when we put in the first 16 and a half acres of vines in 2020. We’ll add another 30 acres next year to complete the vineyard development. We’re surrounded by pine, fir, and chaparral [i.e., madrone, manzanita, and other native shrubs] unique to this area, which will add to the sensory signature of wines from this site. There is a lot of horsepower in these soils. They have potential for high vigor, which can always be controlled by deficit irrigation, and the topography allows for tight spacing. Compared to lower parts of Lake County, our days are not as hot and nights not quite as cool, but on this hill the vines will see intense UV light, which only optimizes grape-skin thickness.” In other words, the vineyard presents what Galzignato called “ideal

conditions for Cabernet Sauvignon”—to which the entire vineyard is planted.

“Our vineyards are very spread out from each other,” noted Galzignato, so he relies heavily on local specialists like Weiss (who owns his own company, Bella Vista Farming) and irrigation specialist Mark Greenspan of Advanced Viticulture to achieve Herzog’s objectives. Greenspan also joined us at the burgeoning site, which will yield its first commercial crop this year. According to Weiss, “USGS maps have identified this area along Bottle Rock Road as Camel Back Ridge”—hence the name of the vineyard.

Greenspan classified Camel Back Ridge Vineyard as “a high-potential site because of its ideal confluence of right soil, right climate, right aspect, and [right] elevation. State-of-the-art

irrigation gives us the opportunity to fine-tune water management. Moisture probes monitor water content in soil and plants literally every 15 minutes—we can water and manage canopy and cluster growth with exact precision.” The goal, Galzignato elaborated, “is to achieve maximum concentration at a lower Brix, timing phenolic and sugar ripeness to occur at the exact same time. This also minimizes methoxypyrazine and any overt green character. It’s the terroir and precision farming that will help us hit our marks with these wines, not anything we do in the cellar. Camel Back Ridge epitomizes Joseph Herzog’s commitment to taking the brand to the next level as a vineyard-focused winery. It fits in with all my own training and experience, which has always been farming-driven.”

PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO



PHOTO COURTESY OF HERZOG WINE CELLARS



*Herzog Wine Cellars partner/
VP Joseph Herzog.*



Irrigation specialist Mark Greenspan of Advanced Viticulture and Camel Back Ridge vineyard manager David Weiss are among the experts Herzog relies on to help oversee its farming practices.

Founded in 1985, Herzog Wine Cellars is an internationally distributed brand owned by the Herzog family, which boasts a 150-year history of winemaking that can be traced back nine generations to Czechoslovakia. While it's anchored by its California-appellated Baron Herzog line, currently retailing at \$13, the portfolio includes multiple tiers of handcrafted wines: Lineage (priced at \$22), Single Vineyard and Special Reserve (which sell for \$48–\$58), Special Edition (\$100), Limited Edition (\$150), and the Ultra luxury tier (\$225–\$350).

A change of direction toward estate farming began almost immediately after partner/VP Joseph Herzog began guiding the family's California operation in 2005. "When we started, all our grapes were purchased from growers—we established strong relationships in Sonoma County, Napa Valley, Clarksburg, and Lodi," he notes. "What changed, in 2007–2008, is we suddenly experienced a shortage of grapes, as little as 50% of what we had contracted. The issue for us is that we are 100% kosher—we can't just go out and make up the shortfall by buying wine on the bulk market because our wines need to be made in our own winery to meet kosher standards. At that point we made a new commitment to start purchasing and developing our own vineyards—or at the very least to sign long-term contracts giving us better control of farming and grape supply."

In 2007, the Herzogs began acquiring properties in Clarksburg, their longtime source for Chenin Blanc, and in 2018, they developed a property in Chiles Valley, a high-elevation eastern sub-appellation of Napa Valley. Meanwhile, in 2014, "we started working with Cabernet Sauvignon farmed by Andy Beckstoffer in Lake County," recalls Joseph. "I could immediately see that this was going to be the next appellation in terms of high-quality Cabernet. When I first saw the Camel Back Ridge property, it was breathtaking and, we knew, perfect for Cabernet." 

A TASTING OF HERZOG SPECIAL RESERVE CABERNET SAUVIGNON

To demonstrate why Herzog Wine Cellars is excited about its investment in Camel Back Ridge Vineyard, its director of winemaking and operations, David Galzignato, presented three barrel samples of 2021 Cabernet Sauvignon, all slated to be bottled under the winery's entry-level luxury tier, Special Reserve. Here are my notes.

Herzog 2021 Special Reserve Napa Valley Cab-

ernet Sauvignon: Deep, almost black violet-ruby color. Ripe-toned cassis and black currant; broad, expansive, full body and dense, textured tannins. True to the appellation in its opulent feel.

Herzog 2021 Special Reserve Alexander Valley

Cabernet Sauvignon: From a tenured vineyard that recently committed to a 25-year contract with Herzog, this wine shows a classic perfume of cedar box and cassis and rounded, densely textured tannins on the medium-full palate, followed by a long, cocoa-dusted berry finish.



Herzog 2021 Special Reserve Red Hills/Lake County Cabernet Sauvi-

gnon: Made from fruit sourced near Herzog's Camel Back Ridge property, this wine possesses the deepest, most vivid purplish-ruby color of all the Special Reserve Cabernets. The pungent, focused nose features mineral-laced cassis hinting almost at brininess; the medium-full body is compact and the tannins are dense, yet the result is svelte, zesty, and long. The Old World structure places minerality on par with the fruit.

Galzignato uses technical analysis to ensure that the phenolic content of his wines is in balance with the alcohol and acidity. The Red Hills Cabernet has a slightly higher alcohol level, but it comes across as the sleekest, most compact wine of the trio. This can probably be attributed primarily to its phenolic content, according to Galzignato: Spectrophotometer readings representing total phenolics show 56.5 for the Napa Valley, 64.6 for the Alexander Valley, and 99.5 for the Red Hills samples. Using these metrics, he can cherry-pick the most phenolic vineyard blocks as they apply to his target style. These truly are terroir-driven Cabernet Sauvignons, authentically backstopped by hands-on innovation in the field.