

LAKE COUNTY



Mason Trinca / Special to The Chronicle

WINERIES

Allure of new vintners' mecca

By Stacy Briscoe

"The story of Lake County is the story of fruit that's blended away," says winemaker Jim Fore.

For much of its wine-growing history, Lake County has sold most of its fruit to neighboring Napa and Sonoma counties. There's a reason those higher-profile regions to the south and west like Lake County grapes. Here, where the low-elevation soils receive nutrients from Clear Lake and the high elevations are rich with volcanic sediment from dormant Mount Konociti, the grapes can produce exaggerated, expressive flavors — especially when it comes to the area's signature grapes, Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Although Lake County has been producing wine since before Prohibition, only recently has it seen a boom in boutique, small-lot wineries staking a claim on a regional wine style: fruit-forward Sauvignon Blanc and downright rustic Cabernet. But because many of these wineries produce just a few thousand cases (if that) annually, the wines aren't likely to appear on supermarket shelves outside the county.

A visit to Lake County means going somewhat off the grid — there's little or no cell service and unreliable Internet seems to be a fact of life with the locals. So trade in the GPS for a paper map, traverse the winding roads and taste how modern Lake County vintners are utilizing the area's unique terroir.

GREGORY GRAHAM

Before starting his eponymous winery, Gregory Graham worked for many years in Napa, most notably as head winemaker for Rombauer. When he decided to purchase his own property, Graham says there didn't seem to be any quality land left in Napa. "Besides," he adds, "the prices were just ridiculous."

Yet he calls the decision to move to Lake County "a lark." Outside of trips to the lake or the mountains, Graham never found a reason to spend much time in Lake County — until he came across his current Red Hills estate. The first thing he noticed? The volcanic, rocky soils found throughout his 27 acres of planted vines.

Graham was also pleasantly surprised by the climate. "It's a Mediterranean-style dry climate," he explains. "We can enjoy a condensed growing season because we don't have the fog in the summer."

The sun-kissed vines provide a lightness and brightness to all of Graham's wines. Even the stereotypi-

cally chewy Cabernet Sauvignon isn't near as weighty as one would expect, with a clean line of acidity and a refreshing finish of just-ripened bush berries.

The best part about owning a winery in Lake County: "Lake County offers an opportunity for those who want to set roots and start a business.

Here you can have the vineyards and the brick and mortar." And that was his dream — to have a real place where people can come and taste his wines among his estate vines. Lake County allowed him to fulfill that dream.

Wines to Try: 2015 Windrem Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc (\$22); 2013



Peter DaSilva / Special to The Chronicle

Crimson Hill Vineyard Zinfandel (\$25).

13633 Point Lakeview Road, Lower Lake; (707) 995-3500; www.ggwines.com. Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Sunday. Free

FORE FAMILY

Jim Fore wasn't always a vintner by profession, but had been a winemaker hobbyist since the mid-1980s, when he and friend Doug Hill, of Hill Family Estates, leased a few acres of Napa vineyards. Under Hill's tutelage, Fore learned the finer points of vineyard management and wine-making.

In 1995, Fore left his job as an engineer draftsman to work alongside Hill full time, and by 2000, he was ready to branch out on his own. He was drawn to Lake County because of its affordability, but also because of the terroir. His Cobb Mountain property in Lake County's Red Hills American Viticultural Area sits at just above 3,000 feet elevation. "Everyone told me it was too high; nothing will grow

Top: Boatique Winery in Kelseyville also houses a boat collection. Above: Gregory Graham strolls with Reba at his vineyards in Lower Lake.

The Spot*
A Place to Remember Good Times.
And Create New Ones.

Burgers. Beer. Live Music.

Spot
14625 Lakeshore Drive, Clearlake, CA
707-900-8671

KonocTees
SCREENPRINTING AND EMBROIDERY

www.konoctees.com sales@konoctees.com
(707) 995-2372 2395 - J Ogulin Canyon Rd.
Fax (707) 995-2373 Clearlake, CA 95422

Screenprinting / Your Garments Are Our Canvas.
Is Our Art..

- Our Dedicated Staff Takes the Hassle Out of Planning Your Printing and Embroidery Needs.
- We Guide You Thru the Process.
- You Get the Garments or Caps You are Proud to Wear.

Done Right and On Time!

(707) 995-2372 or Shop us Online
www.konoctees.com

Head for the Lake!

2-for \$99 Special*

- 2-18-hole rounds of golf
- 2-buckets of range balls
- 2-\$10 lunch coupons
- 1-6-pack beer (dom.)
- 1-golf cart

Best course conditions in NorCal!

*Good Mon-Wed-Fri

19210 Hartmann Rd. • Hidden Valley Lake, CA 95467
707.987.3035 • Tee Times: www.golfhvl.com

HIDDEN VALLEY LAKE

SF Chronicle SFChronicle.com/app