

Cultivating a new crush

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In a industry where Sonoma and Napa are kings, Lake County is putting down roots for a reputation all its own

On the east shore of Clear Lake sits the Spanish-styled Ceago, a new wine-tasting and culinary facility, the most lavish of the six new Lake County wineries that opened last year.

Just south of Ceago in the proposed High Valley appellation, longtime cattle rancher Jerry Brassfield has planted hundreds of acres of grapes, built a winery and is constructing a convention center and spa complex. The total investment will be about \$15 million.

And in the volcanic, rocky Red Hills appellation near Mount Konocti, Andy Beckstoffer, the North Coast's largest grape grower, has a new 1,000-acre vineyard devoted largely to cabernet sauvignon in addition to 1,000 acres in Napa and another 1,000 acres in Sonoma County.

"This is absolutely a sign that Lake County has arrived," said Mark Burch, winemaker at Wildhurst Winery in Kelseyville, among the oldest Lake County wineries.

Even as Kendall-Jackson announced recently that it is closing its Lakeport winery, founded 22 years ago, Lake County is in the midst of a wine industry boom.

Lake County is now home to 10 wineries and 135 growers. The land is cheaper and growers believe the soil and climate are well suited to producing high-quality grapes.

"The world is always seeking new places for good wine to be made," said Robert Nicholson of International Wine Associates in Healdsburg, a wine industry financial consultant, who said he believes Lake County's reputation

will grow over the next decade.

In the past 11 years, vineyard acreage in Lake County has grown from 3,300 acres to 10,000 acres, with 8,800 acres producing grapes for harvest. Of that total, 1,100 acres were planted within the past five years.

In 2003, Lake County growers produced 20,000 tons of grapes, worth an average \$1,200 per ton, for a total value of \$24 million.

The 2004 harvest is predicted to be \$33 million, a nearly \$10 million increase as more vineyards begin producing, said Shannon Gunier, executive director of the Lake County Grapegrowers Commission.

"It is an opportunity to get in on the ground floor, and that is not an opportunity that you get in any other area of California," Gunier said.

Wine production in Lake County is still dwarfed by Sonoma County, which has 60,000 acres of vineyards and a 2003 crop value, the latest available, of \$313 million.

But it is attracting a lot of attention.

"What we see here is a wonderful opportunity," said John Adriance, who is chief operating officer of Snows Lake Vineyards, which is developing a 938-acre vineyard in the Red Hills.

At the same time, Lake County is fighting the notion that its grapes are suitable only for jug wines or for use in blending. They are instead trying to forge an identity as a producer of reasonably priced, quality wines.

"By no means do we think that the Red Hills cabernet is a commodity, and I don't think that the Lake sauvignon

blanc is a commodity," said Beckstoffer. Lake County winemakers also realize that because of the county's isolation, it may never have the Wine Country destination status that Sonoma and Napa enjoy.

"We are off the beaten path," said Myron Holdenried, a fifth-generation Lake County resident and founder of Wildhurst Winery.

A pear rancher, Holdenried planted 30 acres of grapes near his Kelseyville pear orchards in 1966. Now, half of his 400-acre ranch is in vineyards; he produces 35,000 cases of wine and crushes 550 tons of grapes for other growers. It is a \$2 million business.

One of the Lake County's draws is land costs. Lake County vineyards go for \$30,000 to \$40,000 an acre, compared to \$80,000 an acre in Sonoma and \$180,000 an acre in Napa.

Grape growers say that land costs are important, but only a small incentive.

The cost of planting a vineyard -- \$25,000 an acre -- and labor costs are the same as in Sonoma and Napa. After amortizing land costs over 10 years, land cost savings are minimal.

Growers are more likely to tout the quality of the grapes they can grow in the Lake County climate and soil.

Because of the altitude of 1,800 to 2,400 feet and cool afternoon breezes sweeping in from the west, temperatures during the growing season can have a 40-degree swing between day and night, which they say is prime for grapes to ripen.

It is a temperature swing comparable to that of Oakville, one of Napa's prime grape-growing areas, Snow Lake's Adriance said.

The Lake County soils include the clayish, former lake bottom around Kelseyville, which was one of the first areas planted and where grapes for Lake County's signature wine, sauvignon blanc, are mostly grown. Red grapes, however, have quickly surpassed sauvignon blanc, making up

77 percent of the 2003 harvest.

Cabernet sauvignon alone was 48 percent of the harvest.

The newest appellation, Red Hills, is volcanic and heavy in quartz, with good drainage and nutrients that work well with cabernet sauvignon and other red grapes.

Snows Lake is the largest vineyard in Red Hills. It encompasses 2,400 acres, of which 800 are currently planted and about 140 more acres are plantable.

Nearer Mount Konocti is Beckstoffer's 1,000-acre ranch, with 530 acres in cabernet sauvignon. It is the second largest in Red Hills.

Beckstoffer of St. Helena said he chose Lake County in 1998 over Napa County's Pope Valley, believing Lake had better soils.

"We put our money and reputation up there," Beckstoffer said. "It is beautiful land and Lake County one day will be Wine Country."

Most of the wineries are like Jed Steele's Kelseyville winery, a plain, unpretentious building set just off the highway that produces 60,000 cases a year.

Steele, who has been making wine in Lake County since 1991, believes that Lake County should not be only a grape-growing area, that it needs more wineries to raise its profile and enhance its reputation.

"When people buy wine, they tend to buy brand," Steele said.

The newest winery, Ceago, which opened in Nice, is a lavish, 50,000-square-foot tasting room and culinary center, with 1,500 feet of Clear Lake frontage, and 45 acres of hillside vineyards.

An investment of \$6 million to \$10 million, it is owned by Jim Fetzer, whose family founded Fetzer Winery in Hopland, now owned by Brown-Forman. Cattle rancher Brassfield has planted 235 acres of vineyards on the 1,200-acre cattle ranch he has owned for 30 years.

Brassfield's winery is finished and is producing 25,000 cases a year, with an eventual capacity of 70,000 cases. His tasting room will open this year, and he is also building a conference center, spa and 35 overnight accommodations

for visitors.

"I am very enthusiastic," Brassfield said. Brassfield said that after World War II, "Napa became famous, and then Sonoma. We are the new frontier."

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