



Tim's Wine Market

May 2025

By Tim Varan

This month we will continue our tour of the lesser known wine regions of California with a visit to Lake County. Of all the wine regions in the Golden State this one causes the most confusion with our customers thanks to our close proximity to our own Lake County, Florida. While our nearby neighbor is home to Lakeridge Winery as well as several others, I think you will find the quality of the wines from the California location far superior and worthy of a spotlight this month.

Lake County, California is part of the North Coast appellation, lying north of Napa and east of Mendocino counties. The county takes the name from Clear Lake, the largest inland lake in California. While not well known to most consumers Lake County, California has a relatively long history of wine production stretching back to the middle of the 1800s. Most records point to the first European vines being planted in the 1870s by a Frenchman, "Professor" William Claudius Mottier. The Magoon family who established Guenoc Vineyards on the old homestead of silent film star Lillie Langtry, even claim she planted vines as early as 1854, but no official record exists. Regardless, by the time of prohibition there were more than 30 bonded wineries in the region but temperance provided a devastating blow to the industry. The next official vine survey is from 1953 and only 150 acres of grape vines are listed as in production. When wine production began to develop in nearby Napa Valley this also launched a renaissance in Lake County that has shown steady growth ever since.

The modern age of winemaking in Lake County started in 1977 with the opening of Lower Lake Winery. For comparison Robert Mondavi opened the first winery in Napa post prohibition in 1966. By the mid 1980s the region was home to more than a dozen wineries and two appellations, Guenoc and Clear Lake. Perhaps the biggest news was a lawyer named Jess Jackson opened Chateau Du Lac in 1983. His Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay would become the biggest brand in the region but he moved his operation to Windsor, in Sonoma County, when he outgrew the facility in the early 1990s. Andy Beckstoffer, the largest vineyard owner in Napa Valley, also has significant holdings in Lake County, championing the region thanks to the near perfect growing conditions. Today Lake County is home to nine appellations and more than 11,000 acres of vines, primarily red varieties but also some very good Sauvignon Blanc.

What makes the region ideal for wine production is two factors. Clear Lake is the most important for the viticulture because the vast expanse of water regulates the daytime temperature of the surrounding area, cooling in the summer and warming in the winter. The second is elevation, with the vineyards in the county sitting between 1100 and 3200 feet elevation. This is because much of the county lies on the Clear Lake Volcanic Field, dominated by Mount Konocti, an extinct volcano that reaches over 4000 feet in elevation. This is much higher elevation than most of the North Coast vineyards of the other counties, and creates the widest diurnal temperature swings in the region. The result are wines with full ripeness but also lots of natural acidity.

Our feature wines both come from Brassfield Winery, established by Jerry Brassfield in 1988. Jerry made his original purchase in the area in 1973 in what is today the High Valley AVA of Lake County. Subsequent purchases have pushed his holdings to over 5000 acres, including the Round Mountain Volcano, which is dormant. Currently there are only 500 acres of vineyards planted, at elevations that range from 1300 to over 3000 feet above sea level, but he does plan to expand production in the future. Their wines are produced exclusively from estate grown grapes and the winery is certified as farming using sustainable practices.

2021 Brassfield Eruption | \$25 per bottle

All of the grapes used to produce this wine are from their aptly named Volcano Ridge vineyard, which lies on the eastern edge of the estate, adjacent to the cinder cone of the Round Mountain volcano. Planted in the early 2000s this vineyard sits between 2000 and 3000 feet above sea level, where the vines are exposed to cool ocean which slows the ripening process. The soils in this vineyard are a mix of volcanic sands and tephra (pebbles fused by heat), which provides a poor medium for the vines to survive. Their struggle is apparent in the wines, which display impressive power and structure from the challenging conditions. Eruption is a blend designed to show the range of this vineyard, a mix of 30% Malbec,

29% Syrah, 19% Petite Sirah, 9.5% Mourvèdre, 6.5% Grenache, 4.5% Zinfandel, and 1.5% Viognier. My notes do not specifically say it but my guess is the Viognier is co-fermented with the Syrah. Each varietal is fermented separately, the blend is made and then aged in a mix of French and American oak for 10 months before bottling.

In wine industry speak “red blend” is often a euphemism for *off dry* but that is not the case for this bottle. Make sure to decant for a half hour and you are immediately greeted with an “eruption” of blueberry and blackberry preserves, black licorice, dried figs, pipe tobacco, and dried sage. The palate is big, with a chewy edge that makes you think this is the kind of wine cowboys would keep in the saddle bags for nights around a fire eating jerky and beans. This wine is really good now but will improve for a couple of years, so drink 2025-2029. If jerky and beans is not your thing then try with a tri-tip sandwich or fajitas.

2021 Brassfield Cabernet Sauvignon | \$30 per bottle

If the Eruption is a snapshot of the Volcano Ridge vineyard, this wine is a movie composed of grapes grown across the entire estate. Made up of 85% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8.5% Malbec, 3% Petit Verdot, 2.5% Cabernet Franc and 1% Merlot, grown in five different estate vineyards, this is their flagship bottling. For this wine each variety is also fermented separately, but this time the blend is made and the wine is aged in a mix of French and Hungarian oak for 18 months. To me this wine is a perfect representation of Lake County Cab, showing a ripe but restrained nose and a slightly rustic edge on the palate. Decant this wine for a half hour and the nose is more introspective than the Eruption. The fruits are less cooked and more fresh, black currants, blueberry, Thai basil, dark chocolate and a more obvious graphite quality from the volcanic soils. The feel on the palate is dense but the tannins are pretty obvious so you will want to serve this with something protein heavy. Drink 2025-2032 with tri-tip, ribeye or lamb chops.

Japanese Steak and Veggies

If you love the flavors of Japanese hibachi dinners but want something easy to make at home you are going to love this dish. The best part is this dish comes together pretty quickly, is adjustable to the veggies you have on hand and uses only one skillet! Also, umami packed flavors work great with both wines this month. Serve with rice.

3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
2 tablespoons soy sauce
2 garlic cloves, minced
2 (1-pound) boneless rib-eye steaks 1½ to 1¾ inches thick, trimmed
1 ¼ teaspoons white pepper, divided
1 teaspoon table salt, divided
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
2 zucchini (8 ounces each), halved lengthwise and sliced ¾ inch thick
2 onions, cut into ¾-inch pieces
6 ounces shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and halved if small or quartered if large
2 tablespoons mirin

Combine melted butter, soy sauce, and garlic in bowl; set aside. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon white pepper and ¾ teaspoon salt.

Heat 12-inch cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat for 5 minutes. Add oil to skillet and swirl to coat. Add steaks and cook, flipping steaks every 2 minutes, until well browned and meat registers 120 to 125 degrees (for medium-rare), 10 to 13 minutes. Transfer steaks to carving board, tent with aluminum foil, and let rest.

While steaks rest, add zucchini, onions, mushrooms, remaining ¼ teaspoon white pepper, and remaining ¼ teaspoon salt to fat left in skillet and stir to combine. Pat vegetables into even layer and cook over medium-high heat, without stirring, until beginning to brown, about 3 minutes. Stir and continue to cook 2 minutes longer. Add mirin and 2 tablespoons soy-garlic butter to skillet and continue to cook until liquid has evaporated and vegetables are well browned, about 2 minutes longer.

Transfer vegetables to serving platter. Slice steaks ¼ inch thick and transfer to platter with vegetables. Drizzle steaks with remaining soy-garlic butter. Serve.