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## Wine Advisor

# Another wine region grows in California

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*Special to The Seattle Times*



Where do ordinary people go if they want to build a winery business in California?

Believe it or not, it's still possible to do so in the Golden State, but you have to look beyond Napa and Sonoma. Clay and

Margarita Shannon looked just about 35 miles north of the Napa County line. They had both worked at industry giant Sutter Home, Clay as the vineyard manager and Margarita in vineyard administration. Fruit grown in Lake County was being used in some Sutter Home wines, so when they married and decided to start a vineyard and winery of their own, Lake was where they landed.

Lake County is one of the four large regions that subdivide California's North Coast American Viticultural Area (AVA) - Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino being the other three. It is the smallest, the most unusual (for its red soils, high mountains and massive freshwater lake) and the least known. It's also cheap - roughly a tenth the cost of Napa Valley acreage - and cheap land, coupled with wine-friendly growing conditions and plenty of water, is what makes Lake County so extremely attractive.

In 1995, the Shannons purchased 400 acres in High Valley, a mountainous region northeast of the lake. They planted their vineyards at altitudes of 2,100 to 2,400 feet, starting with zinfandel, cabernet sauvignon, barbera and sauvignon blanc and later adding petit verdot, syrah, roussanne, viognier, cab franc, mourvèdre and grenache. The

red, rocky, volcanic soils and steep slopes - which had previously supported walnut trees and native plants such as manzanita, broom, Ponderosa pine and valley oaks - proved ideal for wine grapes.

So well-suited, in fact, that Shannon Ridge winery, begun in 2002, was named one of today's 10 hottest small brands by Wine Business Monthly, an industry bellwether. Beginning Nov. 1, these wines will be available in Washington.

I very much enjoy the flavors that mountain-grown grapes bring to the glass. You will, too, if you want balanced wines with clean varietal character and alcohol levels that remain relatively moderate - rarely above 14.5 percent. Lake County is known best, if at all, for its sauvignon blancs, and the Shannon Ridge 2006 Sauvignon Blanc (\$15) is bursting with the bright, tangy grapefruit and pineapple flavors of the region. Better still is the Shannon Ridge 2006 Viognier (\$18), a unique and potent wine scented with pungent herb, sweetgrass and waxy lemon rind.

Shannon Ridge also makes a **2006 Wrangler Red** (\$18), a blend of zinfandel, cabernet and syrah, nicely fruity with accents of herb. The estate-grown **2006 Barbera** (\$22) is supple and plummy, front-loaded with sweet, pretty red fruits.

"If you like oak, look somewhere else," says Clay. "We're not in the firewood business, we're in the wine business." Bravo! Shannon Ridge's briary, herbal **2006 Zinfandel** (\$18) and dense, dark, saturated **2006 Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$18) are both exceptional for the price. Neither is oaked up. What all these reds deliver is pure fruit, zippy aromas that mingle that fruit with potent whiffs of herb and citrus, and substantial, yet appropriate tannins.