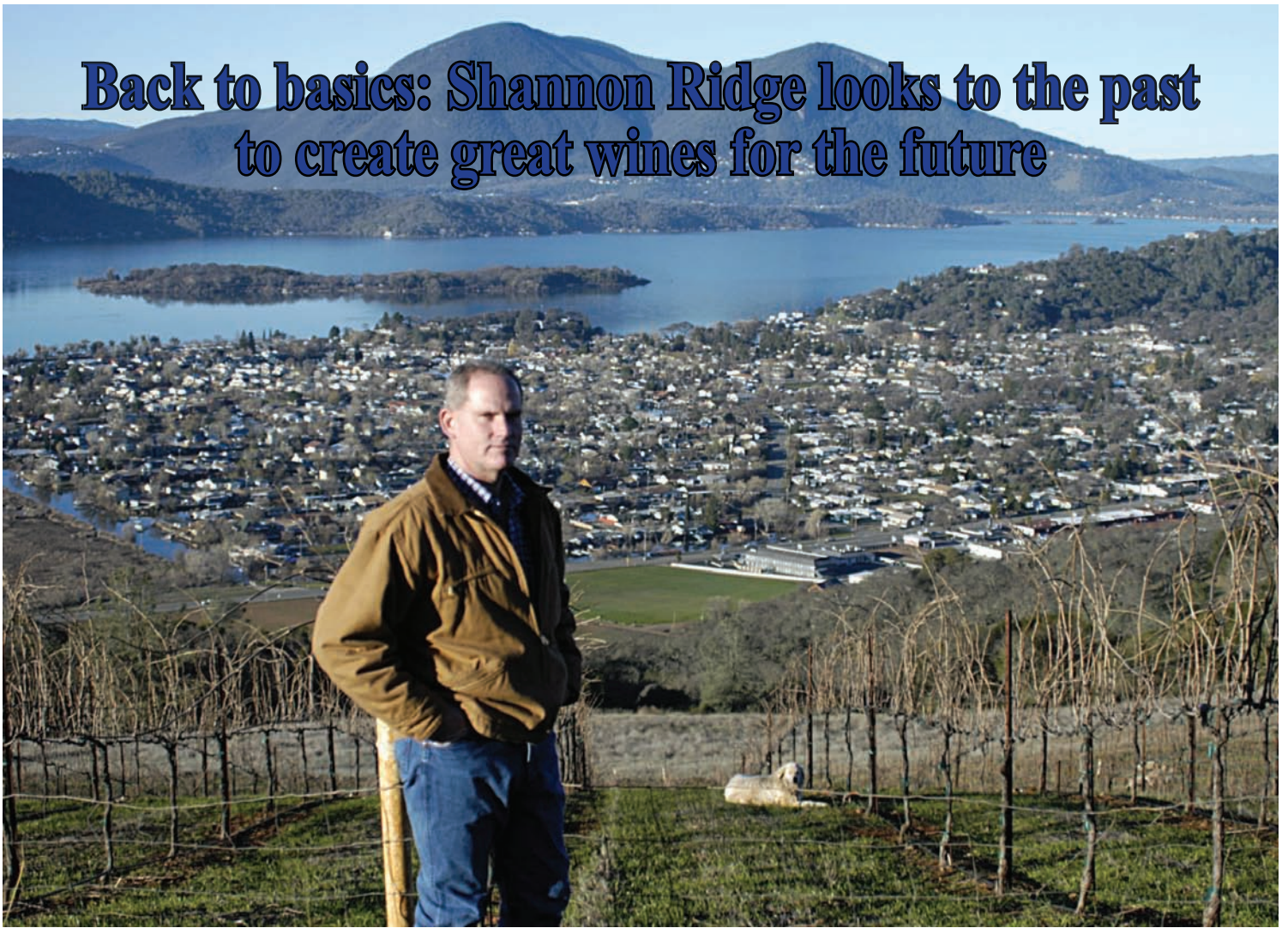


Back to basics: Shannon Ridge looks to the past to create great wines for the future



Shannon Ridge is one of the most scenic vineyards in Lake County. Perched along the ridge in High Valley, it overlooks Clear Lake, Mt. Konocti and the town of Clearlake Oaks. It's home to Clay Shannon and his family.

Clay Shannon has a lot to be proud about. Since 1996 he's been growing winegrapes on his ranch in Clearlake Oaks in Lake County, and in 2002 he and his family began making wine, building a portfolio of wines that mix great flavors with a simple, elegant delivery.

Getting into winemaking "was a natural progression for us," said Shannon.

He's collected a cache of awards for his efforts, and notice of one of the state's finest small wineries.

But if you ask what he's proudest of – besides his family – the pile of awards likely won't come up. Instead, these days, he's most excited about a developing farming methodology that's changing the way he does business.



New definitions of sustainability

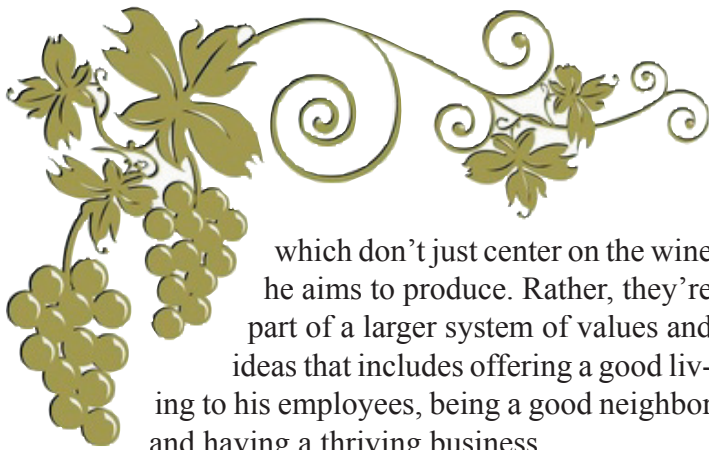
In order to compete in the global marketplace, said Shannon, "We have to be different."

Riding through the vineyards on his 1,000-acre farm – where Shannon lives with his wife, Margarita, and children, daughter Masha and son Ivan – he suggests that sustainability offers that difference.

Increasingly, consumers are concerned about what companies do to preserve the environment and reduce carbon footprint, and that's especially true of agricultural-based businesses like wineries.

Shannon's goals for his company include answering those concerns.

The result is Shannon's unique views of sustainability,



which don't just center on the wine he aims to produce. Rather, they're part of a larger system of values and ideas that includes offering a good living to his employees, being a good neighbor and having a thriving business.

Farm-Ecology

Shannon has reevaluated his operations and returned to some tried-and-true methods to answer challenges in the vineyard.

One of the first changes he made was reducing pesticide use. For one, the ranch is where he and his family lives, and he didn't want them exposed to the chemicals.



The family's trusty sheepdog helps guard the sheep against coyotes looking for a quick snack.



The original weed eaters: Sheep now make their home at the ranch, eating down weeds, easing fuel consumption and offering a fun farm project for the Shannons' children.

So the ranch no longer relies on preemergent herbicides, and only uses a light shot of Roundup in the springtime to control weeds.

From post-harvest to bud break, Shannon has a new tool in the effort to keep his vineyards weed-free.

The tool? Sheep.

An affable flock of 60 sheep have been ranging across the vineyard for the last few months, eating down the weeds and grasses between the vines. The sheep are so efficient and effective that Shannon has bought 30 more to work the hills of his ranch, and plans to increase the flock to 150 or more.

They also quickly and efficiently control grasses in the ranch's oak woodlands; in just four days they successfully munched away weeds and grasses that took two men with weed eaters three days to knock down, and which the men would have to do twice a year.

Not only do they control the grasses and, in turn, help prevent fires, but the sheep also have kept the ranch's rattlesnakes in the rock piles.

Between those benefits and preventing the need for mowers to work their way through the vines, the sheep are playing a big part in reducing overhead costs like fuel, while leaving behind little soil compaction.

The sheep's effectiveness has been an eye-opener for Shannon on the business side; in addition, his family has enjoyed having the good-natured critters around. "They truly are smart and have personalities."



The family's Shorthorn bull, Joe Cumberland, one of the ranch's newer additions.

The sheep also are going to be used in some leaf removal in the vineyards at certain times of the year, Shannon explained. "The sheep just fit into this program so well."

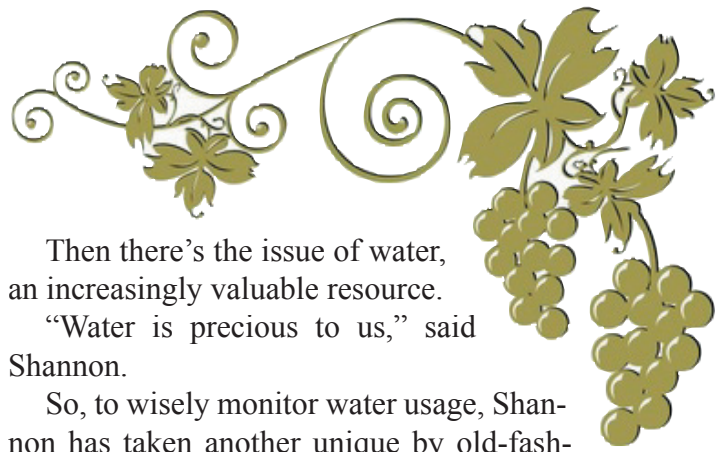
The ranch also is home to an 8-year-old Shorthorn bull, Joe Cumberland, who grazes out in a pasture near the ranch's pond. Joe has six girlfriends who are joining him on the ranch, as Shannon looks to build a small beef herd.

In an effort to help other ranch residents – such as quail – Shannon has taken to carefully managing brush piles, which give the birds shelter. The objective, he said, is not to burn the piles but to maintain them when possible.

When controlling mildew and pest mites, Shannon said his program relies on organic methods including oils and dusting sulfurs. That reduces the pest population to a level that natural predators can do the rest of the work. Ultimately, natural pest control methods such as the organic oil usage should help eliminate sprays altogether and maintain the natural balance.

"We have ladybugs on these vines right now that I have never seen before," Shannon said.

That organic approach has reduced the number of spraying passes through the vineyards, said Shannon. There also are fewer mites and leafhoppers, which had only seemed to multiply with the old, conventional spray program.



Then there's the issue of water, an increasingly valuable resource.

"Water is precious to us," said Shannon.

So, to wisely monitor water usage, Shannon has taken another unique by old-fashioned approach.

"We've gone back to the old science of a shovel."

That means digging holes to check soil moisture, and looking at the quality of leaves on the vines – feeling them for heat, which tells whether the vine is cooling itself.

Another important factor in the vineyard is humidity, which Shannon monitors closely. The nine weather stations posted around the ranch monitor humidity, wind and leaf wetness.



Masha Shannon, 11, looks at the tiny critters in her family's pond.

To maximize his water, Shannon uses night irrigation, which results in less evaporation and more water in the soil. “We get more bang for our buck,” he said.

He estimates there is a 35- to 40- increase in effectiveness due to irrigating at night. Shannon also plans to add composting techniques to naturally enrich the ranch’s unique volcanic soils.

A natural polyculture

Wildflowers, including bright profusions of California poppies, adorn the ranch’s hills, with their bright red volcanic soils. The county’s famed redbud trees and native oaks add their own natural splendor.

In working in the midst of this amazing natural landscape, Shannon has found his changes in approach have had important, far-reaching effects.

Starting at the ground level, less use of pesticide has led to the return of earthworms, said Shannon.

Shannon and his vineyard employees also don’t kill the rattlesnakes or gopher snakes that make the ranch their home. That’s because the snakes help control gophers and other rodents that impact the crop.

The ranch also is home to numerous owls, which are housed in owl boxes dotting the land. Shannon

said he recently realized just how important owls are to controlling pests such as gophers when he observed an owl that killed 11 gophers over a two-day period in order to feed her chicks.

The jackrabbits on the ranch also attract red-tailed hawks and, more recently, eagles have appeared. “We never had eagles here before,” Shannon said.

The sheep and other farm animals, as well as the natural ecosystem, have added up to a complex polyculture. “We have a little bit of everything in order for the system to work,” said Shannon.

More natural land management approaches also have led to an increase in wildlife and the appearance of animals – such as a cow elk and her calf – that previously were rare.

One of the next projects on Shannon’s list is bringing alternative fuel vehicles to the ranch. With soaring gas prices and concerns about greenhouse emissions, vehicles are one of the most visible ways of projecting the ranch’s sustainability message.

Shannon said the effort is to think about every action before actually doing it. In that way, he hopes to create the most natural wine product possible.

“Our story is still evolving,” Shannon said.

*The Shannons’ pond
at the ranch.*

SHANNON RIDGE

VINEYARDS  AND WINERY

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