

# HEAD TO THE HILLS

In the Red Hills region of California, you'll find exquisite wines of great value.

On a recent trip to California we sought out an area new to us. One that sounded really interesting. The area is the Red Hills AVA (American Viticultural Area) located about fifteen miles to the northwest of Napa Valley. Here's why it's interesting. Winegrowers in the Napa Valley wanting to expand their growing area are bumping into a wall. Land prices in the valley are just plain silly and expansion there is financially out of the question.

What some of the sharper growers are doing is moving up the road a little to Red Hills—probably not coincidentally, these are also some of the better quality winegrowers. What all this translates into is potentially great wines at prices far under what you'd pay for similar wines with a Napa Valley name. So, we went to check it all out.

Actually, we found out that it's a little bit better than that. Red Hills has a unique environment for growing great grapes. This is much more than Napa look-alikes at knock-off prices. These are wines with a distinctive character of their own. They certainly struck a chord with me.

## HARDWORKING GRAPES

A few hundred thousand years ago (that's yesterday in geological terms) the Mount Konocti volcano dumped a deep layer of material all over the Red Hills area. How rude of it but how lucky for us. The incredible red, rocky soil contains all kinds of good

stuff for grapes to absorb as they mature and ripen. Add to that altitude and steep slopes. Red Hills vineyards are at between two thousand and twenty five hundred feet. This is important because that's way too high for morning fog. Grapes get to work as soon as the sun comes up. Then, in the early afternoon, a cool breeze comes in to prevent the grapes from baking. How nice. This is a unique place that grapevines all around the world dream of at night.

We focused on one particular vineyard, Snows Lake. For good reason. A group of highly talented winegrowers from some of Napa Valley's most prestigious houses moved to practice their craft here. Starting from a virtually blank page they matched individual hillside lots with grape varieties. What they've created is the best opportunity for grapes to breathe in the essence of this exceptional environment and then deliver it to a glass of wine for you and me.

So, the question is; how are they doing? We got to find out. After driving around the hillside vineyards in a four-wheel drive for an hour or so we were treated to a taste of the wines that Snows Lake bottles under its own label. Hard to forget their names—Snows Lake-One and Snows Lake-Two.

#### A TASTE OF THEIR OWN

Snows Lake-One is one hundred per-cent Cabernet Sauvignon. Smelling the wine brought out a strong sense of earth and woody aromas; much like you'd find in the best wines of Bordeaux. But, surprise, the first sip was completely different—beautiful tastes of deep, dark fruits. Totally unexpected. This quickly faded away and then the earthy and woody stuff kicked in followed by a long lasting bitter finish that went on forever. What was in the background as all this subsided was a definite dry, dusty taste. My first thought after tasting was: "Wow, I just tasted a mountain." Wonderful. Snows Lake-Two is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. A little gentler and a little smoother but equally balanced and complex.

Now, here's where the fun comes in. Most of the production of Snows Lake's eight hundred acres is grown under contract to some of the most famous Napa Valley producers. So they are generally available and not too hard to find. In fact, I sidled up to a glass of Hawk Crest Red Hills Cabernet Sauvignon at a neighbor's



Wine writer Trevor Burton calls Snows Lake—One poetry in a bottle

house just the other day. Hawk Crest is the "second label" of Stag's Leap, one of the most famous names in Napa. This wine sells for around fifteen dollars. That's right in there for my "Tuesday night pizza wine." Put that in the context of Stag's Leap wines that sell for over a hundred dollars a bottle. A good value.

Another producer that I like is Rosenblum. They offer a Syrah from Snows Lake in the twenty-five dollar range. And Cakebread, another one of my favorite wines (although a little on the pricey side), has a Red Hills Zinfandel for around forty dollars. Of course, you could go right to the source and get some of the wine that I enjoyed so

much. Snows Lake produces only three hundred cases a year and they're not cheap. I got a few bottles at forty-five dollars. More than I normally budget for wine but for a great wine like this I felt justified. This is not a wine for casual consumption. I'm going to save it for a more serious occasion. If you're in the mood for some of this wine call Snows Lake at 707.994.9444 or go on-line at [www.snowslakevineyard.com](http://www.snowslakevineyard.com).

Either way; with one of their Napa client's labels or from Snows Lake itself, these are wines to search out. It might take a little work with your wine merchant but the wines are well worth the effort. They are wines to be savored—with food or on their own. Just pour a glass, sit back, take a sip, take it all in and savor that volcanic mountain environment that the grapevines have delivered to your glass. Enjoy.



Trevor Burton—a retired technology marketing consultant now occupying himself in the far more important field of wine and its enjoyment.

Certified by the International Sommelier Guild, Trevor is founder of SST Wine Experiences and, along with his wife Mary Ellen conducts wine education and tasting tours to wine regions throughout the world.