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In Napa's Shadow

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If timing is everything, Stéphane Derenoncourt might be in the right place at the right time—not only for himself, but also for California's Lake County. This globetrotting superstar has his hand in more winemaking pies than anyone (except perhaps Michel Rolland). That he is making wine from bucolic Lake County seemed an odd fit at first, but it really isn't, given the region's rising quality.

"Winemaker" barely defines the scope of Derenoncourt's work. He consults for nearly 70 wineries in 10 countries, including his native France (where he has more than two dozen clients in St.-Emilion alone), but also in such faraway places as Turkey, China, Lebanon and India. After a trip to Napa earlier this year, his next stop was Chile, for a Pinot Noir project.

The quality of his wines, particularly from Bordeaux, with properties such as Château Pavie-Macquin and La Mondotte, is uniformly excellent. His four debut Napa Valley reds, from the 2006 vintage, are as good as any from that year, and as uniformly consistent stylistically as any wines I've ever tasted. They are bottled under his name and made from purchased grapes. (Reviews appear in this issue's Buying Guide.)

On the day he poured his new wines, the one that surprised me most was the Cabernet from Lake County. This rural appellation lives in the shadow of its famous neighbor to the south, Napa Valley—always has and probably always will. Lake County has its plusses, however. The land is ideal for wine grapes and far more affordable than Napa. Yet it has never gotten its due as a winegrowing area and is still struggling to find a niche in the market even as the wines keep improving. It's a bit like the Mâconnais or Côte Chalonnaise is to the heart of Burgundy in the Côte d'Or—solid and respectable, but without much cachet.

Recently, more Napa winemakers have turned their attention to Lake County, primarily for economic reasons. It is more or less an extension of Napa Valley, and of the Mayacamas mountains, but at higher elevation. It's warmer than Napa in the summer and cooler in the winter. But because of its remote location and its cities' lack of aesthetic charm, its path is less taken by winemakers and tourists.

Lake County winegrowers are paying greater attention to their vineyards, discovering that if farmed right, they can make excellent wines. It's a recipe for higher quality, lower-priced wines—the kind the market is craving.

Derenoncourt took an immediate liking to Lake County's Red Hills appellation and its rich volcanic soils.

Red Hills sits at the foot of the ancient volcano Mount Konocti, which is home to 3,000 acres of vineyards ranging from 1,400 to 3,000 feet above sea level.

Derenoncourt's dense, layered 2006 Red Hills Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (92 points, \$40) could easily fit in a flight of the best wines from Napa, but at fraction of their cost. (The Frenchman's Napa wines sell in the range of \$60 to \$220 a bottle.)

The excitement doesn't stop there. The new Cameron Hughes 2006 Cabernet Lot 168 at \$12 (89 points) is amazing, as is the Obsidian Ridge's Red Hills Cabernet bottling. Cabernet Franc, Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah and Petite Sirah also grow well in Lake County; Lake County wines are typically softer, fruitier and less opulent than those from Napa or Sonoma, which are distinguishing features.

Michael Terrian, winemaker for Obsidian Ridge, says Obsidian purchased Lake County land 10 years ago for \$4,000 an acre (Napa land runs in the \$100,000/acre range). Winemakers there often use less expensive oak, and many rent winemaking space rather than sinking money into building a facility.

One man who did pour millions into Lake County was Orville Magoon, who founded Guenoc in the 1980s. It was an ambitious investment that succeeded on most levels except the bottom line. Magoon spared no expense to produce great wines, most notably a sophisticated, estate-grown Chardonnay. His reds were among the best made from Lake County grapes, typically fragrant, delicate and moderately rich, compared with Napa's.

And that's part of the problem—the inevitable comparison to Napa. Lake County lacks name recognition, and its best fruit often ends up in North Coast blends. Derenoncourt's Cabernet probably won't change that perception, but the wines are damn good.

Senior editor James Laube has been with Wine Spectator since 1981.