

Something's Shakin' at Shake Ridge



High-Altitude Grapes Aren't the Only Thing Being Elevated at Yorba Wines

By Hank Shaw Photos by Daren Cliff

Scores of vineyards dot the Sierra Foothills. Few are like Shake Ridge, an isolated patch of vines nestled above the town of Sutter Creek at 1,800 feet. Shake Ridge is part of a growing sophistication in the foothills wine trade; wines from the region have steadily improved over the decades, and it is no longer surprising to see El Dorado or Amador mentioned in *Wine Spectator* or *Gourmet*.

Part of the reason for that is because topflight winemakers have increasingly been drawn to the Rhone and Italian varietals the foothills are famous for. Napa winemakers tired of cabernet and chardonnay are tinkering with Sierra Barbera or Shenandoah Zinfandel, and a small number of vineyard wizards are growing the premium grapes those wines require.

Ann Kraemer is one of those viticultural sorcerers. Kraemer has been growing winegrapes professionally in Napa, Chile, and Oregon for 28 years, and in that time she's been a consultant or vineyard manager to many of the vineyards that are the source of the cult cabernets of Napa. Now she's in Amador, on Shake Ridge's 34 acres of vines. Her vines.

All craftsmen who practice their art in the service of another hold a dream of working without others' strictures, doing what makes them happy in a place and in a way where every detail is theirs to decide. Years ago, Kraemer began looking for such a spot to grow grapes. "I kept looking, but it was always just outside my reach," she said. Ultimately her father, an orange grower in Southern California, agreed to swap some property to help Kraemer buy her vineyard.

Amador was high on her list. "I kinda knew that it would be undervalued—and of high quality," she said. She started with two hundred properties, whittled it down on paper to 30 to 40, each of which she visited personally. In 2001, she came to Shake Ridge. Kraemer took 22 soil samples, checked water levels all over the 185-plus

acre property, looked at where sunlight would hit the future vines and what would grow well where. “This one was a slam dunk,” she said. “I could just see it.”

Kraemer’s vineyard is like looking at the home of an interior decorator or at the private garden of a professional landscaper: all the subtle tricks learned on other people’s land over decades of experience have come together in this one property.

It starts with the varietals. Kraemer came to Amador as a Napa vineyardist, so she tried Napa’s Bordeaux varietals: cabernet sauvignon, malbec, merlot, that sort of thing. How did they do? “Not so great,” Kraemer said ruefully. Her growing season is ten to fifteen days shorter than Napa’s, and that matters with slow-maturing varieties such as cabernet.

All are gone now, save a few remnant vines Kraemer still plays with. Replacing them are blocks of the region’s ubiquitous zinfandel, plus the classic Rhône grapes syrah, grenache, viognier, and mourvedre. Kraemer also grows barbera—a Sierra favorite brought by the initial Italian immigrants in the 1800s— plus newer arrivals well suited to the rigors of the Sierra: Spanish tempranillo and graciano.

No vineyard manager can make grapes reach their potential in an area the vines aren’t suited for, however, and nearly every vineyard in Amador follows this rule. Where Kraemer differs is in the details: what rootstock and clone of the varietal to use, how to trellis them—or to even trellis them at all—spacing, pruning regimen, watering schedule, matching varietal to soil type, even down to the precise angle of the rows along each slope. If you know what to look for, Shake Ridge is nothing short of astonishing: It is a symphony of growth.

But Kraemer keeps that growth restrained. Bulk vineyards can get eight tons of fruit per acre; this is where your box wine comes from. Normal vineyards, those working to make premium wines, will top out at about four tons per acre. Kraemer cuts off so many grape clusters her yields are kept to less than three tons per acre—an extremely tight yield for vines that are seven years old at the oldest; two to three tons per acre is what a typical “old vine” produces, and those vines are more than 50 years old and are at the end of their productive lives.

The reason this matters is because the tighter the yield, the higher quality the fruit. An easy way to grasp this is to think about pumpkins: champion pumpkin growers get those 1,000-pound mammoths by removing all the pumpkins from each plant save one. So the plant has only the one fruit to worry about, and that fruit, if it is a pumpkin, gets massive. In grapes, it is flavor that gets massive in properly pruned vineyards. Think of this in another way: would each child receive more care and attention in a classroom of 10, or a class of 25?

Kraemer’s grapes are her children, and her restraint and discipline makes them honor students among the region’s winegrapes. Kraemer commands a high price for her children, too: Her grapes average more than \$1,000 per ton higher than those in the rest of the Sierra Foothill region. In fact, her grapes sell for prices comparable to those in the Napa Valley.

Indeed, most of those grapes become wine in Napa, and Kraemer primarily sells small lots to boutique winemakers. One of the things she loves as a grower is to taste everything the winemakers have done with her grapes. For example, a half dozen syrahs might be made from her grapes, all just a bit different. “It’s fascinating,” Kraemer said. “When we get together and taste all the wines together.”

As fascinating as that may be, better still is making wine from your own grapes. Thus Kraemer and her family’s personal label, Yorba Wines.

If you recognize the name Yorba, it is what you think: Kraemer is part of the Yorba family that arrived in the late 1700s, some of whom settled Yorba Linda. It is one of California's more prominent citrus-growing dynasties. Kraemer was never supposed to be in wine. Her degree from UC Davis was in pomology, and she was all set to become another link in her family's orange-growing chain when she fell in love with a man from Marin. There aren't many orange groves in Marin, but winegrapes surround the place. So she switched.

Kraemer earned her stripes at Domaine Chandon, and over her nearly two decades as a professional vineyard manager, she has learned all the little tricks she performs at Shake Ridge to grow such high-quality grapes.

But she's not a winemaker, and her grapes needed a great one. Enter Ken Bernards, her old colleague at Domaine Chandon. Bernards's focus had been on pinot noir and Burgundian varietals, and his Ancien label has won acclaim for its subtlety. Alder Yarrow of the influential blog Vinography calls Bernards's chardonnay "certainly the best example of a California chardonnay that hold its own with the crisp chardonnays of France."

Bernards's Burgundian bent predisposed him toward the elegant and restrained—and against the burly, in-your-face fruit bombs common in the Sierra and nearby Lodi. To be sure, there is a lot of great wine in the Sierra, but very little of it exhibits the calm strength of Yorba wines.

The 2005 Zinfandel, made from vines less than a decade old, feels as delicate and complex as the region's old vine zins. Drinking it immediately evoked thoughts of nearby Vino Noceto's Zinfandel, made with grapes from the vaunted Original Grandpere vineyard. Similarly, the 2005 Barbera tastes like a Barbera d'Alba. I am a big fan of Sierra Barberas, as it is one of the foothills' oldest varietals, and the wine Bernards has made from Kraemer's grapes can stand with the best.

But my favorite Yorba wine was the 2006 Tempranillo, of course, this is partly because I am a partisan of Spanish varietal wines and because I make this wine personally. California tempranillos are an odd lot, as the grape has only recently come into prominence as one that matches well with hot, inland climates. Taste a dozen tempranillos from Paso Robles, Lodi, Lake County, or the Sierra and you can taste a dozen different wines—like viognier, each winemaker takes the grape in a different direction. Bernards is one of the few who are thinking Spain, all the way. Kraemer even head-trains her vines (the way old vine zinfandel is often done) because that's what they do in Spain.

And like many Riojas from Spain, their wine is backed up with a little graciano, which adds color and acidity to an already well-structured wine. It tastes Spanish and feels like it could age for the decade needed to bring out its true potential.

Kraemer will be there. She has nearly completed a beautiful home for herself on top of Shake Ridge, a place she can call her own. "Sometimes I just like to sit here and watch the vines," she said.

If you listen carefully, you can hear the music.

WHERE TO FIND YORBA WINES

Yorba does not have a tasting room, so you can't add the winery to your Amador wine-tasting tour just yet. But you can buy them online at www.yorbawines.com or from the following retailers:

David Berkley
515 Pavilions Lane, Sacramento
916-929-4422

Beyond Napa
2580 Fair Oaks Boulevard, #8,
Sacramento
916-481-8665

Sellands
5340 H Street, Sacramento
916-736-3333

Nugget
1414 East Covell Boulevard,
Davis
530-750-3800

Back Wine Bar
25075 Blue Ravine Road #160,
Folsom
916-986-9100

Carpe Vino
1568 Lincoln Way, Auburn
530-823-0320

Capitol Cellars
110 Diamond Creek Place,
Roseville
916-786-9030

Close Window