Ann Kraemer applies Napa-quality viticulture to her Sierra Foothills vineyard

By Linda Murphy
Although Ann Kraemer managed vineyards and consulted for some of Napa Valley's finest winemakers for 25 years – Cain Vineyard and Winery, Chimney Rock Winery, Cuvaisson Estate Wines, Domaine Chandon, Shafer Vineyards and Swanson Vineyards among them – it took her two decades to find a vineyard site of her own. And it's not in Napa Valley.

Kraemer's Shake Ridge Ranch is in Amador County in the Sierra Foothills of California, an area known for producing brawny and sometimes rough-around-the-edges zinfandels, barbasas and petite sirahs – wines utterly unlike most from Napa. Yet Kraemer has hit pay dirt in Gold Country, using her expertise and a large family willing to get its hands filthy, on a remote plot of land east of Sutter Creek.

Kraemer and clan purchased 185 acres on Shake Ridge – named for a former cedar shake-shingle roofing business, not for earthquakes – in 2001 and planted the first parcel of the now 46-acre vineyard in 2003. Just eight years later – infancy in a vineyard's age – Kraemer has 20 or so small-winery clients who purchase her fruit, including a superstar viticulturist and winemaking couple based in Napa Valley, plus her family's own Yorba Wines brand.

Andy Erickson is or has been the winemaker for some of Napa's most acclaimed cabernet sauvignon producers, among them Screaming Eagle, Dalla Valle, Harlan Estate, Ovid and Newton Vineyard. His wife, Annie Favia, managed crème de la crème Napa vineyards for 11 years, including Screaming Eagle, while working for David Abreu Vineyard Management. Together, they produce Favia Wines, darlings of the winemaking world, and it's making a big difference. Managing crop levels, thinning clusters, getting the right amount of light onto the fruit ... not all Sierra Foothills growers are doing this."

In 2010, 119 tons of grapes were harvested from Shake Ridge, divided into 100 separate lots for the blocks Favia and Erickson controlled, and they come only from balanced vineyards. Ann achieves this.”

Favia was the first to commit to grapes from the yet-to-be planted vineyard, and had great say in the varietal mix, rootstocks and clones for the blocks Favia and Erickson contracted to purchase. The only reason Kraemer planted viognier was that Favia wanted to co-ferment the Rhone white variety with its syrah. So impressive was the viognier fruit that in certain vintages, Favia bottles a Suize Shake Ridge Viognier.

Favia Wines also produces two Shake Ridge reds – Quarzo Syrah ($65), influenced by the high quartz crystal content in one particular block of the vineyard, and Rompecabezas, a grenache-mourvedre-syrah blend ($70) whose name in Spanish means jigsaw, or head-breaker. Rarely do Amador County wine prices soar so high, yet Favia Wines commands them.

Kraemer recruited another Napa colleague, Ancien Wines proprietor/winemaker Ken Bernards, to produce 2,000 cases or so of wine per year from Shake Ridge for Yorba Wines – barbera, syrah, tempranillo, zinfandel and Shake Ridge Red – to demonstrate to potential clients the quality of fruit from the vineyard.

"I've known Ann for 20 years and she is a perfectionist, and so passionate about getting the best flavors in the grapes,” Bernards said. “She is applying Napa Valley viticulture to the Sierra Foothills and it's making a big difference. Managing crop levels, thinning clusters, getting the right amount of light onto the fruit ... not all Sierra Foothills growers are doing this.”

"We never set out to make Amador County wines,” said Erickson, who leaves the question to Favia as to why a Napa Valley cabernet specialist would venture so far from home for syrah, grenache, mourvedre and viognier grapes.

"Ann called me and said she found a property and she wanted me to see it,” said Favia, who met Kraemer in 1998, when Favia began her viticultural career in Napa Valley and Kraemer was a mentor. “I asked where the property was, and she said Amador. I thought, eew, that's not for us. But I was blown away when I saw Shake Ridge. I saw the potential. "She farms at such a high level, doing all the by-hand work required. She is absolutely driven and knows what's going on in her vineyard at all times. The way we make wine (at Favia), we need grapes to be balanced, and they come only from balanced vineyards. Ann achieves this.”

"As a consultant, I would have killed anyone who did this,” Kraemer said with a laugh, at why she planted so many different varieties, clones and rootstocks and allows so much client control on multiple picks within blocks. It seems she just couldn't help herself, with all this opportunity.

“This place just felt so right when we saw it,” Kraemer said.

SHAKE RIDGE VINEYARD

- Founded: 2003
- Location: Sutter Creek, Calif. (Amador County)
- Principals: Kraemer family; Ann Kraemer, managing partner and viticulturist
- Vineyard Acreage: 46, on a 185-acre ranch
- Varieties: Barbera, graciano, greco di tufo, malbec, mourvedre, petite sirah, primativo, syrah, tempranillo, viognier and zinfandel.
- Yorba Wines: Approximately 2,000 cases annually (barbera, zinfandel, tempranillo, syrah, Shake Ridge Red).
“Zinfandel and barbara were proven grapes for Amador, and Favia and Tallulah Wines wanted Rhone varieties, so we planted those. I also planted a trial block of red Bordeaux varieties – cabernet sauvignon, merlot, malbec and cabernet franc – just to see what they would do. The results weren’t exciting, except for the malbec, which set a better crop than it does in Napa Valley. We don’t have a long enough season for Bordeaux varieties, so the cabernet sauvignon is now tempranillo and the merlot was grafted over to malbec.”

Small parcels of petite sirah, Spanish graciano and Italian grapes sangiovese and greco di tufo are also planted and have eager buyers.

Experience and customization are the keys to Shake Ridge’s success. Those who purchase Kraemer’s grapes know that they can dictate crop load, canopy management, irrigation, harvest timing and other viticultural factors. Yet she is ultimately the decider. “I want to work with my clients, but I will fight tooth and nail if I think they’re wrong,” she said. “Yet there are many ways to approach a vineyard and we explore all of them.”

Kraemer and her family are descendents of Spaniard Jose Antonio Yorba, who arrived in what would come to be called Orange County in 1769, as a member of the Portola Expedition. He began planting grain and raising cattle, and part of his land was passed down to his great-great granddaughter, Angelina Yorba, who married into the Kraemer family.

The Kraemers are longtime citrus growers, helping to give Orange County its name, and while land eventually became far more valuable for houses than oranges, Ann and her family clung to their agrarian roots, which brought them to Shake Ridge. The labels of Yorba wines depict Yorba family cattle brands from the mid-1850s, underscoring the Kraemer’s pride in what their ancestors accomplished before them.

Real estate prices also extended Ann Kraemer’s quest to find the right vineyard site. When she discovered what would become Shake Ridge Ranch, her parents exchanged Southern California property for the Sutter Creek land, and family members put up cash to plant the vines and purchase equipment. The business is an LLC, with all investors financially equal partners.

While Ann is the resident vineyard manager, waves of Kraemers arrive throughout the year to help tend the vines. Her parents, Dan and Mary Kraemer, who live in San Diego, visit several times during the growing season and are there for the main part of harvest; Dad drives the tractor and Mom keeps everyone fed.

Many of Ann’s siblings, their spouses and their children also pitch in.

“My sister, Susan Kraemer, who lives in Sacramento, is here at least once a week, often two to three days a week, and more when it’s busy,” Ann explained. “She helps with office work, does more than her share of vine work, can drive a tractor if need be, and is responsible for the beautiful garden around the barn.

“Sister Eileen Vukicevich, who lives in Kenwood (in Sonoma County), teaches, but comes up whenever we need an extra hand in the vineyard, especially during harvest. She’s good with vine work, shuttling cases here and there, and helping with wine marketing. Sister Mary Nyeholt lives in Carlsbad, but has been coming up for a week at a time, a couple of times in summer, and then again with her husband, Steve, for at least two weeks during harvest.

“Brother John shoots in now and then when he needs ‘chainsaw therapy’ – he’s a great tree trimmer and works outside of the deer fence on fire protection, trimming up low branches, etc. It’s a good counterpart to his insurance business.”

Many of Kraemer’s family members help with the vineyard, including her nephew Scott Cosca. Photo: Sam Harnack
At various times, adult nieces and nephews are on the payroll, driving tractors, managing canopies, applying and removing bird nets, weeding, green harvesting and whatever else needs to be done. An even younger crew comes for a week or so at a time, school and athletics permitting, training for the future.

Prior to the 2011 harvest, two micro-production winemakers, Angela Osborne of A Tribute to Grace Wine Company and Hardy Wallace of Dirty and Rowdy Wines (you might remember him as the winner of Murphy-Goode Winery’s “A Really Goode Job” social media contest), worked in the Shake Ridge vineyard, to get to know their contracted blocks better (she buys grenache, he purchases mourvedre).

“The help is probably more than we need, but it is indeed a family affair,” Ann said. “It couldn’t work otherwise.”

After studying the soils and microclimates of her roller-coaster-hilly ranch, at elevations of between 1,650 feet and 1,800 feet, Kraemer created small blocks and assigned the best matches in variety, rootstock and trellis system, depending on the conditions. The 34-acre original vineyard was planted in 2003, on volcanic and basaltic soils, with red volcanic loam in some spots, sandstone in others, and quartz in the additional 12 acres planted in 2009 on what Kraemer calls Quartz Mountain.

Shake Ridge is a model of sustainability, using low-input, organic and biodynamic methods whenever possible. Kraemer uses no synthetic fertilizer, and builds up calcium in the soils by applying a mixture of compost and gypsum in the fall. She takes the no-low till approach, planting both seasonal and permanent cover crops to add nutrients (green manure) and prevent erosion on the hillsides. Legumes, in particular, add nitrogen.

At around the time of veraison, a liquid fertilizer produced by California Organics is applied, called Phytamin, a blend of, among other things, fish emulsion, compost and chicken feathers (the latter for their

V&WWM in more ways than one
calcium content). Kraemer might also use the boron blend Solubor DF as a foliar spray.

Mildew isn’t a huge threat at Shake Ridge, given the typical very low spring to summer rainfall. “We have very low mildew pressure, so an organic course of action is easy,” Kraemer explained. “Yet if we’re comfortable, mildew is comfortable, and temperatures of 75°F to 80°F are perfect for mildew development. The cool growing seasons of 2010 and 2011 gave us some powdery mildew, though we have six data loggers in the vineyard that alert us to the pressure.”

If needed, Kraemer uses sulfur and organic oil sprays to combat mildew, though there is a tradeoff. “Oils can hurt the beneficial insects, such as predacious mites, so I’ll apply it only early in the growing season,” she said.

**BIRD CONTROL**

Voracious, grape-devouring finches, woodpeckers and larks are an annual problem, so Kraemer invested in the NetMaster Crop Protection System, sold by Wildlife Control Technology in Fresno, Calif. The tractor-applied system spools netting onto vines and retrieves the nets at a rate of 4 to 5 acres per hour. Its current price is $13,500.

Kraemer employs reusable Birdnet nets (disposable are also available), which her crews tuck under the drip irrigation system and stake to the ground with bamboo skewers; allowing the netting to simply fall loosely to the ground is not enough. “The nets are on the vines for approximately two months, and while it is difficult to work around the nets for crop adjustment and other pre-harvest maintenance, we would have an unacceptable amount of crop loss if we didn’t net,” she said.

Deer fencing surrounds some 60 acres of vineyard area, although Kraemer left open corridors on the remaining acreage, to allow wildlife to go about its business.

At night during harvest, Shake Ridge is a flicker of lights, fireflies darting among the vines as workers outfitted with Eveready headlamps pick clusters and dump their loads into a gondola pulled by a tractor with lamps mounted on the roll bar. It’s counterproductive to bring in a big bank of lights, Kraemer said; the light stand moves as harvesters progress, holding back the fastest pickers and forcing slower ones to move on with the light, even though they might not have harvested all the grapes in their zone.

Row orientation is all over the board; thus, a row running from atop a hill to the bottom is harvested in sections, depending on the progress of fruit maturation.

On a late August day, Amy Freeman, winemaker at EOS Estate in Paso Robles, made the drive to Shake Ridge to inspect two blocks she’d contracted to purchase for an appellational zinfandel project.

“We prune as late as we can, when the tips are just breaking off on the barbera and grenache. That’s usually the third week in March,” Kramer explains to Freeman. There is no frost protection in the vineyard, she continued, because rarely is it needed. “We simply didn’t plant in the low-lying areas, knowing cold air would collect there.” They discuss which rows will work best for Freeman, combining spice notes, mid-palate depth and a pick date in which the various rows will likely be mature.

As Freeman prepares to depart, Kraemer offers to send her cluster samples, in cold packs via overnight delivery, so that the winemaker can track grape ripeness without jumping in her car every few days. It’s all part of the meticulousness that Kraemer brings to Shake Ridge, and to her clients. Even the Napans are taking notice.

Linda Murphy, who lives in Healdsburg, Calif., is the West Coast correspondent for Decanter magazine and covers the West Coast wine scene for JancisRobinson.com, both based in London. She also is a columnist for WineReviewOnline.com.

Comments? Please e-mail us at feedback@vwm-online.com.

Kraemer’s grapes are also in demand among birds, so she protects her fruit with bird netting. Photo: Sam Harnack