

Shake Ridge Vineyards

Amador County, California



RANDY CAPAROSO

**A SINGLE VINEYARD HAS RAISED
THE STATURE OF AMADOR COUNTY.**

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The reputations of U.S. winegrowing regions have a history of being turned around almost overnight, often by just one or two producers. Look at what Beaulieu Vineyard and Inglenook did for Napa Valley, what Au Bon Climat and Sanford Winery did for Santa Barbara County, or what Eyrie Vineyards did for the Willamette Valley, among other examples. Similarly, as bottlings bearing the Shake Ridge designation have appeared over the past two or three years, the prestige of Amador County has suddenly skyrocketed, and the word has gone out: world-class wine is now being made in the Sierra Foothills. And as with many previous such developments in the industry, this emergence can be attributed to one person: Ann Kraemer, who owns Shake

Ridge Vineyards with her parents and siblings.

The clan has also established its own brand, Yorba, made by longtime friend Ken Bernards at his Ancien Wines in Carneros. Bernards calls Kraemer a “perfectionist”; Helen Keplinger, who crafts Shake Ridge wines under her own name at Napa's Bryant Family Vineyard (where she is the full-time winemaker), refers to Kraemer as “a winemaker's grower—definitely among the most brilliant vineyard managers I've ever worked with.”

Among the other highly regarded producers currently drawing from Shake Ridge Vineyards are Favia Erickson Winegrowers, owned by Annie Favia (who has also worked for David Abreu) and her winemaker-husband Andy

Photo by Randy Caparoso

TERROIR

Erickson (associated with Dalla Valle Vineyards, Harlan Estate, Screaming Eagle, and Staglin Family Vineyard, among others); Gallica, owned by Rosemary Cakebread (Spottswoode's long-time winemaker); Turley Wine Cellars; and a host of artisanal producers such as Aratas, Avenue Wine Company, BellaGrace Vineyards, Buccella, Eos Estate Winery, Forlorn Hope, Hatcher Winery, Irwin Family Vineyards, Newsome-Harlow Wines, and Tallulah Wines. More recent additions to the list of buyers include Dirty and Rowdy Wine (from Hardy Wallace, Murphy-Goode's social-media correspondent), McCay Cellars (an up-and-coming Lodi brand), and A Tribute to Grace Wine Company (owned by Angela Osborne).

For Amador County, the arrival of Kraemer and her entourage of glamorous winery clients has been a long time coming. In the late 1970s—when Chateau Montelena and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars were fresh off their "victory" in Paris, Robert Parker was still a full-time lawyer, and white Zinfandel was an innovation—there was plenty of talk about Amador County playing a leading role in what Robert Mondavi was calling the "Golden Age of California wine." At the time, Amador seemed to have everything going for it: a rich history of winemaking from vines planted as far back as the California Gold Rush; slopes ranging in elevation from 1,500 to 2,500 feet, reminiscent of classic European hillside vineyards; and a number of promising bottlings—especially Zinfandels—from producers like Carneros Creek, Montevina Winery, and Sutter Home Family Vineyards. But somewhere along the line, the wheels fell off; Carneros Creek refocused on Pinot Noir, Sutter Home traded in on fruity pink wine, and Amador failed to overcome its reputation for rough, rustic wines without any breeding.



Shake Ridge grower Ann Kraemer (far left); Shake Ridge Vineyards (above).

Kraemer is a descendent of José Antonio Yorba, the namesake of the Yorba brand of oranges, who emigrated from Spain to California's Orange County in 1769. She earned her degree from the University of California-Davis in pomology, but when she moved to Marin County to get married and found a dearth of citrus groves there, she switched over to grapes. For more than 25 years now, she has managed and consulted on vineyards for a roll call of top California producers, including Cain Vineyard & Winery, Calera, Chimney Rock, Cuvaision Estate Wines, Domaine Chandon, Paul Hobbs Winery, Shafer, and Swanson Vineyards.

While she was distinguishing herself in the viticultural field, Kraemer craved a vineyard property of her own. Real-estate prices in Napa Valley being what they are, she started looking in the Sierra Foothills. She evaluated some 40 locations before find-



OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Favia Rompecabezas, Amador County 2008 \$65

Roughly equal portions of Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Syrah; the first two are co-fermented, then blended with the Syrah and aged in 700-liter puncheons. Sweet, bouncy wild berries emerge on the nose, accompanied by notes of licorice, smoky coffee, wild scrub, and a touch of citrus peel. Despite a sinewy, dense texture, the palate is balanced and buoyant.

Favia Syrah Quarzo, Amador County 2009 \$65

Heady, intense, spicy perfumes overcome a youthful reticence, shooting off flashes of violet, roasting meat, and pine. Sturdy, thick Syrah meatiness—brawny but not unruly—takes on espresso-roast qualities in the mouth.

Keplinger Lithic, Amador County 2009 \$50

42% Grenache, 34% Mourvèdre, 24% Syrah. A fieldful of white flowers and strawberries spring up in the glass, followed by notes of roasting mocha and lavender-rosemary *garrigue*. Dense, broad, high-powered, high-toned sensations of flowers, berries, and minerals cascade across the palate.

Keplinger Sumo, Amador County 2009 \$50

Co-fermented Petite Sirah (75%) and Viognier (5%) blended with Syrah (20%). This strikingly original, opaque black-purple wine features an abundance of black-and-blue berry aromas entwined with dried scrub, a white flower-lavender potpourri, and touches of chocolate and bacon. The palate is dense, juicy, full bodied, and thick yet fluid. As Helen Keplinger puts it, “The essence of sumo—absolutely massive, with finesse and art.”

Yorba Barbera, Amador County 2008 \$28

A beautifully floral nose displays blackberry fruit veering toward blueberry. The zesty, vigorous, medium-full palate is supported by a firm, tannic backbone.

Yorba Syrah, Amador County 2007 \$32

This wine is floral and moderately intense, but true to the variety, mixing scents of violets and blackberry. Moderately full-bodied yet not heavy, it displays some velvet texturing, with varietal flavors driven by zesty acidity.

Yorba Tempranillo, Amador County 2008 \$38

Purple-tinged ruby. Sweet tea and maraschino cherry appear on the nose, with undertones of sweet leather. A velvety, meaty mouthfeel leads to fruit-focused flavors, tightly wound by zippy acidity and moderate tannins.

Yorba Zinfandel, Amador County 2007 \$28

The black-cherry aroma is sweetly fragrant rather than jammy. Zesty, medium-full, and silky-textured, bolstered yet un hindered by sturdy tannin, this Zin has a definite “claret” feel.

Prices are current estimated retail.



Annie Favia, co-owner of Favia Erickson Winegrowers.



Co-owner Andy Erickson.

ing one just east of Sutter Creek that met her standards: a 185-acre site at 1,650-1,800 feet above sea level, cleared from a century of ranching. In 2001, her parents, Dan and Mary Kraemer, exchanged property in Southern California for the land in Amador; the capital needed to plant vines, purchase equipment, and build a working barn and lodging was pooled by family members. In 2003, the Kraemers began planting what now amounts to 46 acres of vines.

Showing their agronomist roots, the entire family has come in from nearby Sacramento and as far away as Carlsbad to pitch in. Visitors to Shake Ridge are invariably greeted by the sight of Ann’s siblings working the ranch: Susan driving a tractor, John manning a chainsaw, Eileen or Mary pruning the vines. Nieces and nephews weed, leaf, hang bird netting, and do whatever else needs doing. The brains and most of the labor, of course, are supplied by Ann, especially when it comes to dialing in with top winemakers.

Favia, herself a viticulturist, has considered Kraemer a mentor since they met in 1998. “When Ann called in 2000 to say she found a vineyard and would love for us to make wine from it, we were totally unsure because it was in Amador,” Favia recalls. “We thought, ‘Eww, warm climate,’ but when we actually saw the property we were completely blown away—the rolling hills, all the different exposures, the rich volcanic soils with great crystal and quartz stones strewn all over the place. It seemed like a magical place from the beginning.”

Favia and Erickson became Kraemer’s first clients, working together on row directions, rootstocks, and multiple selections of Rhône varieties—six clones of Syrah, three of Grenache, and one each of Mourvèdre and Viognier. As Favia says, “We had heard about the raw potential of Rhône varieties in the Foothills, and we had a lot of faith in Ann, because we knew her as a grower and knew her complete dedication to uncompromising quality.” The first Favia wine sourced from Shake Ridge was a 2005 Syrah, which Erickson describes as “incredible from the start and still an incredible wine. Ann delivers perfect grapes that we don’t have to do anything to. A lot of it comes from the unique, gravelly, iron-rich soils at Shake Ridge, but having a great grower is what also makes all the difference in the world.”

Helen Keplinger, winemaker and owner of Keplinger Wines.



Photos by Randy Caparaso

TERROIR

Keplinger, who was introduced to Kraemer through Favia and Erickson, received her first bins of Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvèdre from Shake Ridge in 2007. “The first time I visited Shake Ridge,” she remembers, “I was struck by this incredible site. There are so many different aspects to its rocky soil, derived from ancient volcanics, sloughed down and mixed in with an uplift of basalt, soapstone, shale, and quartz. It’s a warm site, but it doesn’t really have the overall heat we get here in Napa Valley because of the cold nights, which give awesome recovery for the vines, great respiration, maintenance of acidity, and really good ripening. In my experience, Rhône varieties need higher elevation—an incline with rocky soils and great drainage. And they need to bathe in the sun without getting sunburned. The Shake Ridge site supplies all those elements, and Ann supplies the meticulous vineyard management. On top of that, she totally respects the winemaker—listening to what you want and adjusting to your style to help you get what you’re trying to do.”

Tegan Passalacqua, who has bought two vintages of Shake Ridge Zinfandel for Turley and one of Grenache for his yet-to-be-released personal label, agrees: “Ann probably knows more about farming than all her clients put together, but what makes her special is that she listens. She’s interested in a winemaker’s opinion, which is a rare quality anywhere, not just in the Foothills.” He frames the vineyard in terms of Priorat, describing Kraemer’s work as “heroic farming” and the site as “our new Catalonia.”

But when evaluating the qualities of the wines themselves, Passalacqua has another take: “More than anything, the Zinfandel we get from Shake Ridge reminds me of Barolo. We have been getting a very fine-grained, granitic tannin, not unlike that you find in Barolo, Cornas, and Hermitage. It’s not a winemaking tannin that comes from seeds, stems, jacks, or use of invasive techniques like enzymes. It’s a distinct tannin that comes from the site, which is essentially a decomposed granite mixed with volcanics and quartz. Aromatically, our Zinfandels from Shake Ridge have more rose petal and zest of orange peel, which is not typical of California Zinfandel. They’re also a great example of how erroneous the assumption is that anything east of Napa is ‘warm climate.’ Although Amador County has been known for high-alcohol, sweet-toned Zinfandels in the past, the wines from Shake Ridge just don’t resemble that. Ann farms so well, we don’t have to push

anything—we can get super-intense wines at relatively moderate sugar ripeness.”

At least once a year, Kraemer gathers her winery clients to taste one another’s bottlings. Favia observes that “there is a common thread in all of our wines, despite the fact that our blocks are managed differently, picked at different times, and everybody’s philosophy in regards to winemaking is different.” Erickson describes that thread as “a fruit-forwardness with a lot of elegance, good backbone, great power, and beautiful aromatics.”

Of all the wines coming from Shake Ranch, the fruitiest and least oaked may be those of the grower herself, bottled under the Yorba label. But when you get beyond the black cherry of her Zinfandel, the sweet tea of her Tempranillo, and the prickly blackberry of her Barbera, there is something of a sweet pine-needle quality to the scent, perhaps attributable to the plethora of Ponderosa, sugar, and digger pines, underlain by carpets of manzanita, coffeeberry, toyon, and madrone, that dominate the rolling hills around the vineyard. In Keplinger’s Syrah and Petite Sirah blends—aged in more neutral, 600-liter *demimuids* rather than barriques—the woodsiness becomes a recurring rosemary or animal earthiness, almost *garigue*-like, accompanied by the espresso-roast or coffee-ground notes that are also found, to varying degrees, in the Rhône-style blends of both Favia and Gallica.

Individual styles notwithstanding, these wines show the contrasts and multiplicities within the glass that can be obtained only from world-class sites. The best summary might be that of John Lockwood, an assistant winemaker at Failla and Littorai: “In a way, Shake Ridge is a microcosm of the process of showing what it takes to discover just how great vines can do in a place like Amador, and in California in general,” he says. “The vineyard is epic, but it’s taken a dream grower like Ann to unlock its amazing potential.” 🍷



Tegan Passalacqua, winegrower at Turley Wine Cellars (above); Rosemary Cakebread, owner of Gallica (below).



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