

Volcanic views from the Brassfield estate.

tectonic TERROIR

**BRASSFIELD ESTATE WINERY CAPTURES
THE ESSENCE OF VOLCANIC SOILS IN
CALIFORNIA'S HIGH VALLEY AVA**

story by Randy Caparoso / photos by Alexander Rubin

“TECTONIC TERROIR” sounds cool, but more importantly, it refers to something tangible—something every sommelier can put an organoleptic finger on.

In his book *Volcanic Wines: Salt, Grit and Power*, John Szabo, MS, suggests that volcano-influenced terroirs around the world produce a shared set of sensory characteristics. Chief among them are elevated acidity and moderate ripeness due on the one hand to the smaller-berried clusters born of relatively infertile soils and on the other to the type of flavor concentration associated with the longer hang time that can result from decreased access to water on hillsides. Additionally, he says, “volcanic wines” have savory and sometimes salty or earthy qualities often likened to minerality.

These qualities are reflected in the wines of Brassfield Estate Winery, which is practically a monopole in the High Valley AVA of Lake County, California. But as you would expect, they are not exactly the same as those you find in the wines of Mount Etna in Sicily, Somló-hegy in Hungary, Santorini in Greece, or even the neighboring Red Hills AVA.



Brassfield Estate Winery president Chris Baker, proprietor/CEO Jerry Brassfield, general manager Jonathan Walters, and CFO Simon Whetzel.

Wherefore art thou, High Valley? Established in 2005, the appellation straddles a cinder cone volcano called Round Mountain. During a 2017 Lake County SOMM Camp sponsored by *The SOMM Journal*, attendees noted several distinctions in Brassfield Estate’s wines compared not only to other Lake County wines but to other “volcanic” wines around the world: The Sauvignon Blancs had more-than-ample natural acidity combined with floral and tropical notes and a near-complete absence of green pyrazines. The inky-black Cabernet Sauvignons showed luxuriously textured, concentrated black fruit, also with minimal pyrazines. And the Syrahs (with up to 10% co-fermented Viognier) offered lavish, violet-like fragrances as well as vibrant acidity and meaty phenolic content, achieving the proverbial “iron fist in a silk glove” profile. In other words, the wines defied the austere (or, in Szabo’s words, “not always soft and cuddly and lovable”) character and pervasive non-fruit notes often associated with volcanic expressions.



These strengths have undoubtedly played a role in an almost improbable state of affairs for Brassfield Estate as a brand: Over the past four years, it has been enjoying double-digit increases in sales across the country—even as the wine market continues to struggle with declining growth.

A FOUNDATION IN FARMING

Jerry Brassfield—who founded his namesake estate in 1998—attributes this success to several factors, including sales and marketing, yet the driving force has always been the wines themselves. Granted, Brassfield Estate was not an overnight success: Its story is one of trial and error. As Brassfield tells it, “I came from a lower-middle-class farming town

Brassfield Estate Winery is located in Lake County, California’s High Valley AVA.



Just 500 acres of Brassfield Estate's 5,000-acre property are planted to vine; the remainder is currently wild.



called Porterville, in San Joaquin County. This gave me the basic foundation—values like ‘work hard’ and ‘tell the truth’—that eventually led to my being able to buy my first property in Lake County, a 1,600-acre ranch,” in 1973.

Brassfield ran his Lake County property as a cattle ranch for 25 years—until he saw Clay Shannon of Shannon Family of Wines planting vineyards on neighboring land. “That triggered something in me,” says Brassfield, “because my brother Robert . . . had founded a small winery with me in the Santa Cruz Mountains during the 1970s. Our winery was called Felton Empire, which we built up to about 10,000 cases before reaching an impasse. Felton Empire was a 10-acre property, with maybe about 7 acres of vineyard. In order to sustain ourselves as a business, we needed to increase production, which meant buying grapes in regions as far away as Salinas Valley and Sonoma County. The problem with small wineries with limited resources is that you have to work with farmers whose priority is high tonnage, not high-quality grapes. Eventually you settle for the fruit that you can get and end up resorting to winemaking practices that I call manipulation.

“So in 1987 we sold that winery, and around 1996 I saw Shannon planting vineyards. I started thinking, how can I do this—this time around the right way? First thing I did was ask a Napa Valley group

called Crop Care to assess the possibility of growing for quality first and tonnage second. We did soil testing in 100 different sites, in areas we planned to plant first and areas we hoped to plant in the future. We set up 12 weather stations and collected weather data every 15 minutes for two years, between 1997 and 1999.”

Brassfield has never strayed from his original plan to leave no stone unturned when it comes to ensuring the quality of his grapes and therefore of his 100% estate-grown wines. Brassfield Estate general manager Jonathan Walters, for instance, describes the winery’s ongoing focus on its volcanic identity: Given its location on a high-altitude cinder cone, “We farm for the highest levels of phenolic content. Most of our recent plantings are on mountain slopes, so we install irrigation systems that give us precision control—designed to increase the water at the top of the slopes where soils are well drained while reducing water at the bottom where organic matter holds more water.” In fact, he adds, “Precision viticulture allows us to achieve consistent quality in all our sites, drilled down to every subsection of every block.”

It should be noted that the estate also contains Franciscan series (sedimentary sandy loam) and Wolf Creek loam (sandy clay loam) soils. According to Brassfield, “It is the ridges, hillsides, and benches that have more volcanic influence: lower vigor

yet well-drained soils where grapevines might struggle, great for red wines such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Our first plantings were on gravelly alluvial soils eroded off the hillsides over thousands of years. I call this our 'valley floor'—but keep in mind that our valley floor sits at an 1,800-foot elevation, over 400 feet above Clear Lake."

But High Valley is defined by far more than volcanic soils and elevation. Because the AVA runs east-west, says Brassfield, "the other major factor is the wind coming straight off the ocean, sucked further inland by hotter air in San Joaquin Valley. This has tremendous impact on the

vines—enough to shut them down during certain parts of the day, giving the fruit longer hang time throughout the growing season.

"Combine that with the cool air and unimpeded sunlight you naturally get in a region that is higher in elevation than most of California. The key is that the fruit doesn't sugar up too fast, giving flavors the time to develop, which shows up in the quality of the wine. That's what makes our wines *High Valley*."

While farming according to the guidelines of the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance, Brassfield describes his ethos as going "beyond sustainable." Over



Jerry Brassfield with renowned sculptor Douglas Van Howd, whose works are displayed throughout the estate.



the years, with the addition of adjoining parcels, the property has grown to 5,000 acres, just 500 of which are planted to vine. "Most of it sits on rugged topography that's too steep for anything but grapes," says Brassfield, with the highest ridges reaching 2,500–3,000 feet; meanwhile, "over 4,000 acres are maintained in their natural state—meaning what we have planted to grapes is surrounded by wildlife: bears, mountain lion, coyotes, deer, all the wild turkey in the world, you name it. We are, however, built to grow. We have identified another 2,000 plantable acres on hillsides [with] the necessary water infrastructure. In the next two years, we'll probably plant about 140 acres to keep up with the demand for our wines. We have always kept potential growth in mind and all our [efforts are] centered around maintaining control throughout the entire process" (including the operation of their own bottling line).

A LIMITLESS VISION

In a wine market that he describes as "always unforgiving," Brassfield attributes the brand's steady growth to winemaking and sales and marketing equally. Says Brassfield, "From the beginning, we decided to take on consultants to enhance our winemaking. Our first consultant was Nils Venge from Napa Valley. Here's a winemaker who has made 100-point wines and played a huge part in getting us off the ground. For a few years David



Ramey was our consulting winemaker. Who doesn't love and respect everything David does?

"Today we have the wonderful husband-and-wife consulting team of David and Katherine DeSante, who work closely with our winemaking team of Megan Anderson and Joe Vonk. After all these years, I consider this team to be the best of all the full-time winemakers we have had. Joe and Megan are our varietal program winemakers. They work very closely with each other and with Francisco Dominguez, our cellar master [formerly of Ferrari-Carrano and Rack & Riddle], to maintain our very high standard of winemaking [while] expressing the terroir of this unique AVA."

Longevity is another trait Brassfield values in his employees across all departments, from sales to distribution. "Our VP/national sales manager, Billy Ayer, for instance, has been with us for 20-something years," he notes. "Like Jonathan and others in the winery, he has a real understanding of what we are, where we've been, and where we're going."

Meanwhile, Chris Baker is new to the operation, having joined Brassfield Estate as president in 2023. Nonetheless, says Brassfield, "He has been a godsend, taking us further in the national and global market. Over the years we had built out from a solid base of direct-to-consumer, retail, and on-premise sales, but it's Chris, with his previous experience with DAOU, who has taken Brassfield to the next level."

According to Baker, "I had actually retired from the wine industry twice before, when Jerry gave me a call in 2023. At the time I was on an off-road motorcycle trip across the country. But after the way Jerry described his vision for the brand, particularly his commitment to 100% estate-grown wines, I was convinced that a return to the business was more than worthwhile. I devoted my first year with Brassfield to reorganizing the sales team's focus on Cabernet Sauvignon, to which 56% of our vineyards are planted; and starting in 2025, we will be aligned with the largest and best wholesaler nationally, Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits."

Says Brassfield, "The on-premise market, as you know, has not exactly been on solid ground over the past few years. The biggest challenge is simply holding on to placements in existing accounts. I'd say that the first 'rule,' as we'd call it, for our own business model has been to overdeliver on quality with more than competitive pricing. That's where vineyard management and winemaking come in."

His longevity in an up-and-coming region also helps: "A major reason we have been able to hold our ground and in fact increase our positioning is that we don't have any land cost up here comparable to costs paid per acre in regions such as Napa or Sonoma County. Back in 1973 we paid \$350,000 for the entire 1,600 acres, which included all its cattle and the horse barn that was eventually converted into our warehouse and tasting room."



Once we started planting in 2001, our cost of putting in the vineyard was about \$20,000 an acre. It's gone up to \$40,000 today, but relative to the \$300,000, \$500,000 or more per acre that it costs to plant in Napa, there is no comparison. This means we can offer a Cabernet Sauvignon or Sauvignon Blanc equal to Napa in quality for a much better price."

Although it does not contribute directly to the brand's success, Brassfield's vision may best be epitomized by his lifelong friendship with renowned sculptor and painter Douglas Van Howd, recognized for his lifelike bronze sculptures. Both have channeled their passion into their respective creations over the course of the decades, sharing similar hopes that their work will be appreciated and protected well beyond their lifetimes. Van Howd tells us, "I've known Jerry for 50 years, watching him put his heart and soul into his winery. It's truly his passion. That passion may be gleaned in the impeccable quality of his wines, but you can see it in the winery itself. It is a destination because it is maintained as a beautiful natural landscape with lakes, magnificent 500-plus-year-old oak trees, water birds, and deer roaming the grounds. I'm grateful to play a part in it—Jerry has collected many of my sculpture pieces for 40 years, which are on display in the tasting room and throughout the grounds. While Jerry always talks about his vision for the winery as being without limit, believe me—he means, and he backs up, every word of it!" SJ