

THE WASHINGTON PANEL

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**New Wines, New Winemaking
The Renaissance of
Brassfield Estate.**



Turning Brassfield



into Gold

by Meredith May / photos by John Curley

As the new President of Brassfield Estate in Lake County, David Green had the faith to rebuild. He has taken measures to hire David Ramey to craft a new profile for the wines. Here, he walks up the Electric View; with ridgetop Syrah and Viognier on gravelly soils and afternoon mistrals blowing, it is High Valley's echo of Hermitage. Note Clear Lake in the background.



WITH A NEW WINEMAKER AND A FORWARD-THINKING WINERY PRESIDENT, **BRASSFIELD ESTATE** IS IN RENAISSANCE MODE

Six years ago, Anthony Dias Blue and I made the trek up to Lake County to visit Jerry Brassfield and experience one of the most awe-inspiring properties known to vine. The hour-and-a-half drive from Napa Valley included climbing, winding roads that eventually led to the view of Clear Lake. The 20-mile long body of water—California’s largest natural lake—is not only breathtaking, but also makes Lake County a special AVA. It invites ocean breezes inland, acting like a giant refrigerator, cooling the air and maintaining an environment within an environment for a variety of micro-climates and the potential for spectacular grape-growing.





The California-Mission style architectural effect. As visitors come up the drive on High Valley Road, their first sight is the jaw-dropping entryway into Jerry Brassfield's visionary winery. Architects Ron Firestone and Dennis Turner designed the "Early California" winery and visitor center buildings, incorporating influences from Italy and Spain. The underground caves are the equivalent of two football fields in length.

The cool valley floor is perfect for growing Pinot Noir and many of Brassfield's white varietals.



High Serenity Ranch: Six Years Later

Imagine a 2,500-acre estate including a winery, vineyards with a thousand-acre wildlife reserve. Within the relatively new AVA of High Valley, Brassfield's High Serenity Ranch is all that and more: California-Mission style villa, habitat for fowl and animals on the prowl and serene mountain-top retreat.

Whereas six years before, this was still a newly developing vineyard site for Brassfield, one of the area's pioneers, the estate has now come into its own—a realization of the ability to craft world-class wines in Lake County. The frontier continues to widen, and if the wines were good then, they are better than good now—in fact, they are different animals altogether.

David Ramey's Influence

The renaissance at Brassfield is threefold: the wines, the winemaker and the brass.

David Green's experience in running wineries, dealing with distribution and sales forces over the past 15 years, has

led him to an ideal position as President of the winery. Knowing there was room for improvement in the flavor and character of the previous iteration of Brassfield Estate's portfolio, he brought on David Ramey to consult and shape the winemaking approach—one of the most influential winemakers in the U.S.—to bring an uplifted style and finesse, changes which were initiated with the 2009 vintage. Green also narrowed down the SKUs for wholesale distribution, creating a serviceable array of impressive branding that fulfills the destiny of the grapes from this spectacular growing region.

"Ramey insisted that we would not have a Cabernet or Chardonnay in the book," Green states, adding, "He just wants to show off the most appropriate varietals from this amazing place."

Volcanic Soils

Rich, red drained alluvial soils are the foundation for the vines, impacted by Round Mountain volcano. Its last eruption, which occurred ten thousand years ago, created the natural dam that



formed High Valley, with elevations ranging from 1,800 feet to 3,000 feet.

The warmer “climate” atop the hillsides and ridges makes them perfect settings for Rhône varieties, as well as Zinfandel, Malbec and Tempranillo. Surprisingly, the valley floor cools down to even chillier temperatures than Carneros, forming a haven for white varieties and textured, Burgundian-style Pinot Noir. The 40- to 50-degree swing in temperatures is funneled into the area’s ravines, a phenomenon that has inspired an additional 30 acres of Pinot Noir to be planted on a property named Bickford, surrounded by oak trees. David Ramey describes the personality of the Brassfield Pinot Noir—made from Dijon and Pommard clones—as “honest wine, not cloying or co-fermented.” Green adds, “At this price point, producers look for color, with a leaning to co-ferment with Syrah or Merlot. Not us. This is 100% Pinot Noir.” Ramey has captured the charm of the varietal.

Selling out their first 4,500 cases of the latest vintage of Pinot Noir (2010), the winery will release the 2011 vintage sometime this month. Green points out, “We expect to have 7,500 cases of

2012, and eventually, once we are in full Pinot production, we will produce about 16,000 cases.”

“The World Is Opening Up”

David Green walks us up Electric View, home to Syrah and Viognier vines that were barely a dream on our visit less than a decade ago. Now, the vines are bearing fruit, growing and struggling as intended, within a pattern of narrowly spaced Roman trellising. Low-to-the-ground clusters of grapes stay warm from the gravelly soils as the vine canopy shields them from sun-

burn and protect them from potential dehydration due to harsh winds. We pick up a stone and even in the late afternoon, we lose our grip as it almost burns our hand.

“Jerry Brassfield told me that there is a continued series of surprises up here,” Green notes as we drive the steep and sprawling terrain, watching wild turkeys streak by and savoring the tranquility of deer and their fawns. “He feels as if the world here is continuing to open up.” Microclimates, from marshland to pine forest and meadowland lead to the same road: Serenity.

The Wines of Brassfield Estate

Brassfield 2011 “Serenity”, High Valley A blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio and Gewürztraminer, this gentle white reflects the calming balance of its proximity to the estate’s own Lake Serenity. A light straw hue matches the perfume of steel-edged pears, juicy melons and the tartness of a McIntosh apple. Think Orvieto meets Albariño. It’s a study in crisp, popping acidity. “It behaves at the table,” says David Green.

Brassfield 2011 Pinot Grigio Fermented in stainless steel barrels and neutral oak barrels for six months (and stirred on the lees every two weeks), this white sings with a mid-palate creaminess and texture. But on the outside, steel and salt, defined by lemon, mango and chamomile; the fruit teeters on a tightrope of acidity and stone. The fruit comes from two vineyard blocks on the valley floor of High Serenity Vineyard. Both of these blocks are comprised of gravelly, sandy loams and are located in one of coolest vineyard sites in all of Lake County.

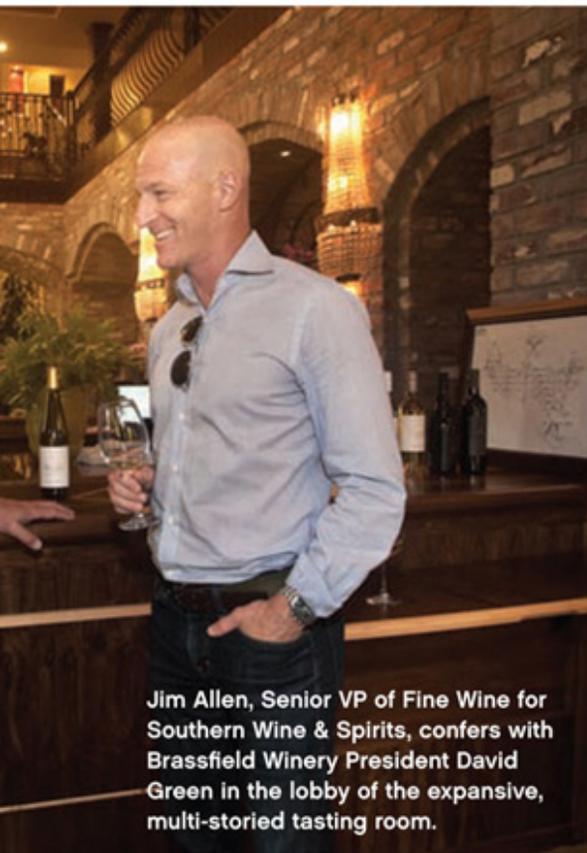


Brassfield 2011 Pinot Noir, High Valley

Dusty roses and muddled cherries make this a bright and happy wine. Cinnamon spice adds to the mid-palate fullness. The textural quality is key here—a fresh, delicious factor and pretty aromatics are part of the overall effect.

Brassfield 2010 “Eruption,” Volcano Ridge Vineyards

The vineyard site is on steep slopes, 2,200 feet in elevation, on pure, volcanic soil. A blend of reds (Syrah, Tempranillo, Malbec, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Petite Sirah and Zinfandel), Eruption is an intriguing house of characters: from the dynamic to the rich to the exotic, but all accessible and generous. Structure holds this blend in check. Melting violets, a touch of fennel and a range of jammy, blue-to-black fruit makes this as appealing a food wine as sipped on its own. ■■



Jim Allen, Senior VP of Fine Wine for Southern Wine & Spirits, confers with Brassfield Winery President David Green in the lobby of the expansive, multi-storied tasting room.