

A Path Of Learning

An Interview with Jerry Brassfield,
Proprietor and Chief Executive Officer, Brassfield Estate Winery

EDITORS' NOTE Jerry Brassfield purchased his original 1,600 acres in the western section of High Valley at High Serenity Ranch in 1973. Over the next three decades, he added more sections of the valley as well as the Round Mountain Volcano. As the Clear Lake vineyards matured, the winery added more tank and barrel storage capacity and a state-of-the-art crushing facility, realizing Brassfield Estate's true destiny as a world-class winery producing high-quality, reasonably priced estate-grown wines as unique as the land on which they're grown. Brassfield's pioneering leadership can already be seen in the incomparable speed in which Brassfield Estate has prepared itself to meet demand. Through a history growing up on a ranch in the San Joaquin Valley to owning a winery in Santa Cruz mountains in the '70s with brother Bob, Brassfield's entire life has been on ranches and around farming.



Jerry Brassfield

WINERY BRIEF Brassfield Estate Winery & Vineyards (brassfieldestate.com) are located in the western section of High Valley at High Serenity Ranch in Clearlake Oaks, California on a truly distinctive and remarkable winegrowing property. The valley floor vineyards sit at 1800 feet in elevation. The higher vineyard blocks rise to nearly 3000 feet. The temperature fluctuation on this unique property is always one of the most amazing experienced in California. Today, the Brassfield Estate includes over 5,000 acres across both the eastern and the western sections of High Valley, as well as the Round Mountain Volcano. In 1998, the different sections of the ranch were investigated for their potential to produce outstanding estate-grown wines. The vineyard development started in 2001 and has grown to a state-of-the-art farming operation as well as a winemaking facility.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I was born and raised in Porterville, California, which is a small farming town in the San Joaquin Valley. I lived in various parts of the state before settling in the Bay Area. I was introduced to the nutrition industry at age 19, where I worked in sales for a startup company, and was able to invest in it. After selling my interest in that company, I purchased a 4,000-acre cattle ranch in the Sierra Nevada mountains. I also

stayed in the nutrition space, and am still involved in it today. I founded my own business, now known as NeoLife, an international nutrition supplement company, where I still serve as Chairman. My daughter, Kendra, is now CEO.

In 1973, I purchased a second cattle ranch, known as High Serenity Ranch, in Clearlake Oaks, which is located in Lake County, California. I originally planned not to keep the 1,600-plus acre ranch long, but I realized it was something special. This property is what has become my namesake, Brassfield Estate Winery.

Along the way, my business ventures have also spanned a wide range of industries, including investment in BJ's Restaurant & Brewhouse when the chain was starting out, a general partner in a mobile home park construction company, as well as in a group of car dealerships in the Bay Area. These ventures are all under good management, so my heart, my passion, my time, and my mind are now focused on Brassfield Estate Winery.



Brassfield Estates single vineyard cabernet sauvignon

Will you provide an overview of Brassfield Estate Winery's offerings?

At Brassfield Estate Winery, we grow a number of different red and white grapes, crafted into both varietal wines and blends. We handle the production of each single wine from vine to bottle. Our most plentiful vineyards are Cabernet Sauvignon. We also grow other red grapes, including Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec, as well as Pinot Noir, Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Petite Sirah and Zinfandel. Our white grapes include Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay,



A Brassfield Estates vineyard

Pinot Gris, Viognier, and Gewürztraminer. We are in the heart of volcanic terroir, and actually have a vineyard that has a volcano right on the property. Unlike other Northern California Coastal wine regions, like Napa Valley and Sonoma, which have areas of volcanic soils, the High Valley AVA is more uniformly volcanic. We really see the difference in quality and taste from the volcanic soils, especially for the red wines. We're receiving a lot of interest now among wine lovers in wines from volcanic regions.

We've been experimenting over the past 25 years, and making the best wines that we know how. From our research over the years, we've been able to select the best variety for each soil type and plot, and fine-tuning our blending techniques. Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc represent the most characteristic grapes for Brassfield Estate Winery, given the impressive fruit quality that the special terroir of the High Valley AVA is able to convey. We've also put a lot of effort into creating our Reserve wines. In 2023, we released our first single-vineyard wine: our "Block 14" Cabernet Sauvignon. This comes from a special parcel with a unique terroir, and is home to our best and most age worthy wines. Along with the "Block 14" Cabernet Sauvignon, the parcel also contributes to our Estate Malbec and Estate Petit Verdot.

We've caught the attention of our peers in the wine industry and have recently expanded into national distribution with Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits – we're now in 44 states, as well as in Canada, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

What can a guest expect to experience when visiting Brassfield Estate Winery?

There are a lot of beautiful wine properties out there, but I personally think ours is the most beautiful, interesting property. The entry to our winery, with sycamore trees lining the way, leads guests to the gorgeous, elegant Tuscan-style tasting room surrounded by lovely grounds. The winery was built sustainably, with repurposed materials, which is really important to us. Around the property, we have bronze sculptures by my longtime friend, renowned sculptor Douglas Van Howd. We go out of our way to make our guests feel special and like they're part of our family. It's important to educate our visitors about our wines and wine-making, and take the time to talk with them. Guests can take a tour of our extensive cave system, about 65,000 square feet, which is used to age our wines. A lot of our property is kept natural, with a number of wild animals, which is amazing. When visiting, guests can taste through flights of our wines, either indoors or in our outdoor garden. Charcuterie boards and a warm baguette with olive oil are also available to accompany our wines. Guests are also invited to enjoy our outdoor picnic area. We have a Wine Club available, and also offer a number of events at the winery.

Will you discuss Brassfield Estate Winery's commitment to sustainability?

As a 100 percent estate winery, from vineyard to bottle, we are committed to being the best version of sustainability. We believe in caring for the land in a way that not only allows us to produce high-quality wines but also ensures the longevity of our property. We believe in constantly improving

ourselves. Our philosophy is to treat the vineyards as I treat my own body. At the estate, with only 10 percent of our total area planted to vineyards, the rest is inhabited by wild animals and vegetation native to the area. In 2023, we received the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance label certification, so every year, certain standards must be met to continue with the certification.

At the estate, we take a holistic approach and do things that will benefit the vineyards and the estate in the long run, such as composting the leftover grape skins and materials during the winemaking process, using bats to combat insects on the property, opening up the vineyards after harvest to the wild animals on the property to create biodiversity and carefully selecting the cover crops used to increase our organic content, to name just a few. In the winemaking process as well, we are bringing in more and more sustainable practices, like using lighter-weight bottles and eco-friendly paper for the labels. Since we have our own on-site warehousing, this helps reduce shipping and fuel.

We also look at sustainability from a social point of view, in terms of giving back to the community. We do a lot of charity work through the companies I'm involved with, like the NeoLife Family Foundation. Lake County is one of the poorest counties in the state, and we give to causes every year. We are planning to form an organization dedicated to helping kids in the area, where we can share some of our resources to make a difference in their lives. Our hearts go out to them; you need to start with the kids.

What has made the wine industry so special for you?

I've always felt that a glass of wine makes every situation better, whether you're celebrating with family, relaxing in the evening,

enjoying it with a great meal, or bonding with a friend. Even when I was young, in my 20s, I'd often have a glass of wine, along with some cheese and French bread, for my dinner. As you advance in your career, you tend to move up in sophistication in terms of the wine you drink, and may have an everyday wine, and a special occasion wine. And, of course, knowledge of wine is just infinite, so there is always something new to learn. I believe in the long-term wine business, and the enjoyment of wine being part of a healthy lifestyle. The act of and meaning behind enjoying a glass of wine with loved ones never changes.

As the Winery celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, are you able to reflect on its accomplishments and the impact it has made?

The path we've been on for 25 years is a path of learning. I've always believed that you learn much more from the mistakes than from the successes. We've always believed that the winemaking is the best when the team is working together. Since the beginning, we have not been afraid to learn. We've had winemaking consultants since the beginning. We see this as a long-term process, and they're an extension of our own winemaking team. We want to always keep learning. Our first consultant was Nils Venge, and we currently have the husband-and-wife team of David and Katharine DeSante. They're wonderful.

Over the time I've had Brassfield Estate Winery, we've learned how important it is to keep a long-range approach and view. I also firmly believe in keeping our principles intact and what we believe: treat the land right, treat our employees right, treat our wine right, and take the high road – always. We believe that our biggest wins will come from that style of thinking: make great wine, sell at a reasonable price, over-deliver on quality, and treat our customers well, taking that extra step to make them happy. ●



Brassfield Estate Winery