

**For Immediate Release!** Local gem collector exhibits California's State Gemstone at Ironstone Vineyards Heritage Museum.

Brett Keller has an eye for blue – Blue gems, that is. For nearly three years he has made a rewarding hobby of collecting and preparing Benitoite, which is California's State Gemstone. His extensive collection of the mineral will be on display at Ironstone Vineyard's Heritage Museum through February 2010. The collection recently won first place in the California Federation of Mineralogical Society State exhibition and was awarded the prestigious Hamel Mineral Trophy for outstanding mineral display.



When I ask somebody, Keller says, ‘What is the state flower? The state motto? The State Bird? Most Californians know The Poppy, Eureka, or California Quail. Few are aware, however, that the state has adopted Gold as our state mineral, Serpentine as the state rock, and Benitoite as our state gemstone. Benitoite is found in gem quality crystals at only one mine in the entire world. This mine, originally called the Dallas Gem Mine, was later known as the Benitoite Gem Mine and is now known as the California Gem Mine. The mine opened to public rockhounds in fall 2006 for the first time on a fee basis, but is now closed indefinitely.

Although Keller loves gems and jewelry fashioned from Benitoite, it is the preparation of Benitoite that has become a passion and a rare artform.

“Benitoite is no longer found in veins and fissures in rock at the gem mine, but rather is found today only in some forty acres of tailings. The mine is played out commercially, and only rarely are quality specimens found.”

Keller first visited the mine with his daughter Alyse in January 2007, the first of nine trips to the mine to look for Benitoite ore. The ore consists of highly altered serpentine, where Benitoite and Neptunite, also an extremely rare mineral only found at the mine, grow and are later coated with a white mineral called natrolite which filled in the mineral cavities around the prized gems. On their first trip The Kellers had extremely good luck and found the materials for two significant specimens, valued at approximately \$4,000.

“The preparation of Benitoite requires a painstaking and time consuming process of etching natrolite away with hydrochloric acid to reveal the minerals beneath. Lapidary Skills are also important, because the ore first needs to be shaped and often removed from larger pieces of rock. The Kellers are active members of the Calaveras Gem and Mineral Society, which has extensive lapidary facilities available for use.

The artistic aspect of Mineral preparation is in creating aesthetics for display by trimming and shaping to create interesting display. How the specimens are mounted and oriented contributes to their value. All specimens in the collection were prepared by Keller, with an emphasis on museum quality display.

Keller thought it only natural to display his collection at Ironstone, Where the largest existing specimen of crystalline gold is displayed. 'This world famous specimen exemplifies what collectors and enthusiasts of Earths Treasures truly enjoy and appreciate. It is my hope to build an awareness towards Mineral Collecting and Lapidary Art.' He credits Stories in Stones of Angels Camp and Ironstone's Heritage Museum for helping bring awareness to our mineral heritage, and the Calaveras Gem and Mineral Society for its interpretive programs and lapidary instruction and activities.

Benitoite was discovered in 1907 in the Diablo Mountain Range north of Coalinga California by prospector James Marshall Couch. Couch, not knowing what he had found, first thought he had found a deposit of blue diamonds, but it was UC Berkeley Geologist George Louderback who deemed the mineral a new and unique mineral and named it after the headwaters of the San Benito River.

In 1985 California Governor George Deukmejian signed Assembly Bill designating the rare gem.

'It is only fitting that Benitoite is our state Gem. Although found as grains in sands in Belgium and Texas, and as microscopic crystals in Arkansas and Japan, Defined gem quality crystals are only found in the Clear Creek Recreational Area at a handful of mines. Only one mine, The Dallas Gem Mine, actually mined the stone commercially.

In addition to Keller's Exhibit, specimens he has prepared from the mine are available for sale at Ironstone.

