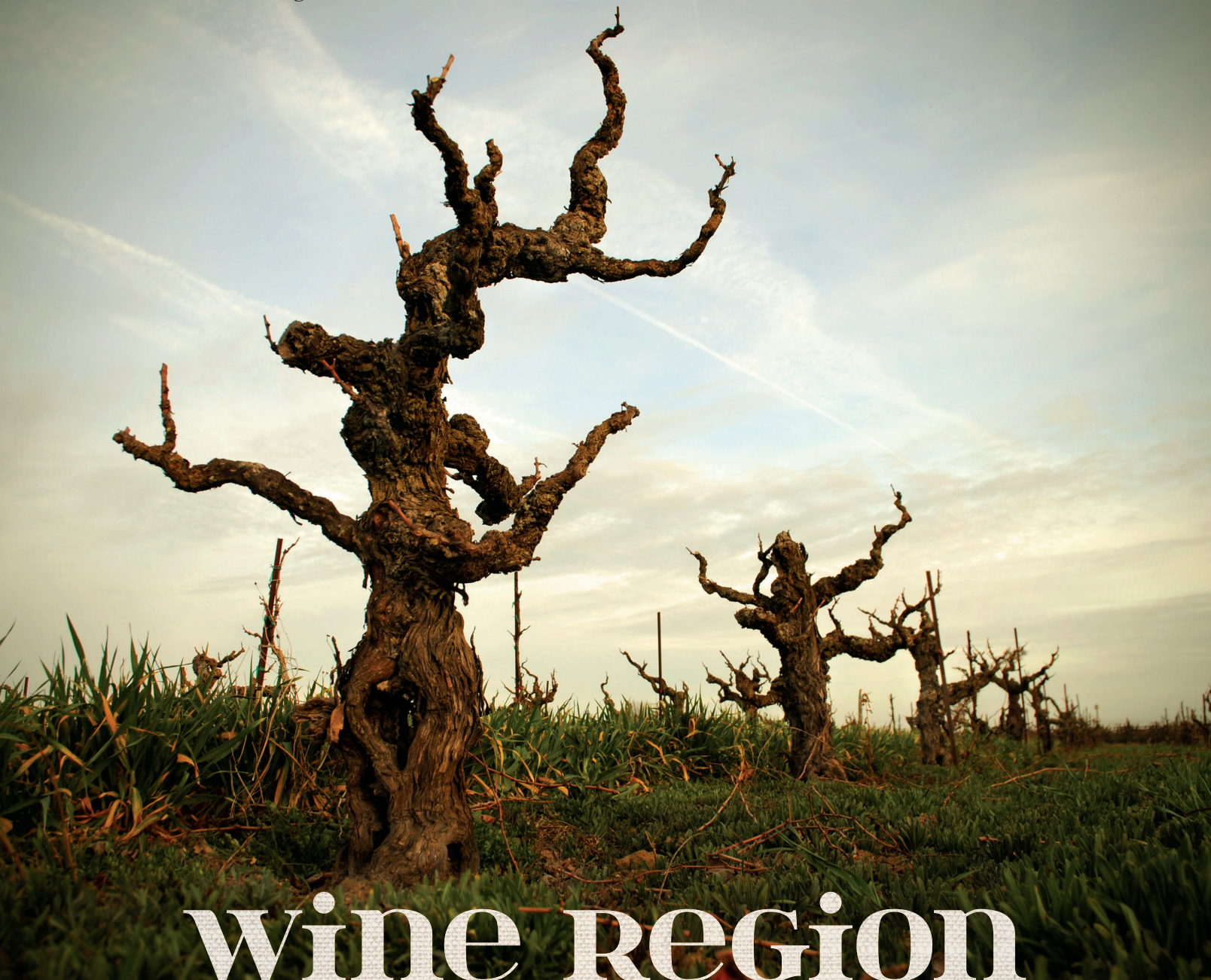


AT THE BAR wine region renaissance



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Lodi is evolving as newer winemakers join the well-established.

BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN

The vineyard acreage in Lodi is larger than plantings in Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino and Lake combined. Compare Lodi's 110,000 acres of vines with the state of Washington's 46,000 acres, and Paso Robles, a large California appellation, at 32,000 acres. So why isn't Lodi as well-known as other regions?

Lodi's first vineyards were planted in the 1850s. Settlers from Italy, Germany and Portugal farmed Lodi as a grape-producing engine for California wine and shipped grapes to the East Coast for home production during Prohibition. Over the years, the majority of Lodi grapes have been purchased and then sold in blends and proprietary wines by the country's industry leaders, such as E. & J. Gallo, Constellation, Fetzer Vineyards, Napa Ridge, Ravenswood and Beringer. Lodi has 83 wineries, contrasted with more than 450 each in Napa and Sonoma.

But Lodi is experiencing a wine renaissance. Old vine zinfandel may be the signature Lodi wine, but other varietals are gaining recognition. Wineries in Lodi present a fascinating mix of well-established farm families and newer winemakers, and vintners happily take root there.

Joel David Liscio, wine director at Bin 14 wine bar in Hoboken, New Jersey, lists merlot from Peirano Estate in Lodi, and what he calls "amazing" old vine zinfandels. Yet, he adds, "They like to mix it up in Lodi. You can also find crazy single varietal wines like muscat canelli or tannat."

Just as Napa Valley was not renowned as a fine wine producer before the 1960s, Lodi is poised to burst onto the wine industry's radar. But exposure to the area is needed.

Lodi country

Any discussion of the Lodi wine region starts with clarification on its geography. Lodi is not situated in the hot inland Central Valley. Positioned 100 miles east of San Francisco Bay at the edge of the San Joaquin-Sacramento River Delta, the region boasts a Mediterranean climate ideal for grape development, with warm, not blistering hot, days and afternoon "delta" breezes portending cool nights.

Unlike the Central Valley, Lodi is blessed with an ample water supply from the Sierra Nevada and a deep water table. In the Central Valley, over-drilling of wells and a four-year drought has resulted in soil subsidence and challenges to maintaining agricultural production.

Lodi is subdivided into seven appellations, including Mokelumne River and Clements Hills, with unique terroirs. Arthur Hon, beverage director at Sepia in Chicago, lists Lodi wines because of the exceptional terroir. He adds that economic factors benefit the area. "As vineyard land in Northern California has become more expensive and difficult to acquire, the next generation of winemakers seek unique areas like Lodi to create exceptional products."

Only 70 minutes from Lodi, Revel Kitchen & Bar and Esin Restaurant & Bar in Danville do not list Lodi wine, and guests are not pressing for it. General manager Andy Tetlow says, "I hate to say it, but my experience and knowledge of the area is limited—I want to learn more."

Rising interest in Lodi

A major change maker in the turnaround of Lodi's reputation is the Lodi Winegrape Commission (LoCA). Founded in 1991 by more than 750 growers and wineries, LoCA's mission is to foster quality improvements and market awareness of the region.

Stuart Spencer, owner of St. Amant Winery in Lodi and an active participant in LoCA, notes, "When Lodi became active in the 1990s, few wineries actually put 'Lodi' on their labels. The commission has raised awareness of the region in many ways."

Tim Holdener, owner of boutique producer Macchia in Acampo and a LoCA board member, says, "When we launched Macchia 15 years ago, there were a handful of small wineries. Now, dozens of owners or winemakers stand behind the tasting bar telling their stories."

Randy Caparoso, editor-at-large for SOMM Journal, lives in the area and has observed the positive outcomes from LoCA initiatives, such as the widespread adoption of Lodi Rules, California's first third-party certified viticulture standards for sustainable winegrowing.

LODI, A DESTINATION WINE COUNTRY

At Jeremy Wine Co. in downtown Lodi, guests can taste at the Old West-style bar, sip in the high-design back room with decorative Js imprinted on the wall, or hang out on the peaceful patio. Owner Jeremy Trettevik owned a design studio before turning to winemaking, which explains the Napa Valley ambience of the tasting room.

"I grew up in Lodi, so jug wine is in my roots," he says. "It's natural for me to offer Jeremiah's Jug—made with zinfandel, petite syrah and petite verdot—in a refillable growler. Our barbera is like your pudgy best friend, a very good thing with fruit-forward flavors."

Lodi is emerging as a wine region with its diversity of wines and tasting options. The infrastructure to support tourism—restaurants, events and accommodations—is developing. For lodging, several national brand hotels and B&Bs serve the area.

There are more than a dozen tasting rooms in downtown Lodi. The style varies, from cozy-in-the-industrial-park and near-downtown St. Amant to farm-friendly Michael David and modern m2 Wines in Acampo. The Lodi Winegrape Commission (LoCA) hosts its own tasting room, Lodi Wine & Visitor Center, at the Wine & Roses Hotel a few minutes' drive from downtown. Lodi wines are available to taste and buy, and staff offer tips for day outings and winery visits.

The property features the historic Towne House Restaurant, located in the former family owner's house. The wine list boasts a wide selection of Lodi wines to pair with dishes such as chicken tamale pancake for lunch or lamb shank for dinner. Other restaurants range from the hip School Street Bistro with seasonal farm-to-table fare to the classic Pietro's Trattoria with housemade pasta and Italian specialties, as well as housemade baked goods and a diverse menu at The Dancing Fox Winery, Brewery, Bakery & Restaurant.

OPPOSITE: Old zinfandel vines at Michael David Winery vineyard

Zinfandel, star of the Lodi galaxy

Two-thirds of the 75 varieties of wine grapes grown in Lodi are red, and zinfandel dominates. About 40% of California's zinfandel is grown here. Gallo has made iconic Hearty Burgundy for more than 50 years under the broad California appellation—comprised mainly of Lodi zinfandel.

Camron King, executive director of LoCA, says the early success of Lodi zinfandel was with big, tending-to-sweet “fruit bombs.” These big zinfandels remain favorites in the meat-centric Midwest, says Chad Roe, wine director at Terry B's Restaurant and Bar in Dexter, Michigan. “Our guests like the style and excellent fruit flavors that come from the area's warm days and cool nights. Lodi wines pair well with our house-smoked meats.”

Hon from Sepia also notes that the current interest in finding and preserving old vineyards, many on ungrafted original roots without commercial rootstock, brings awareness to Lodi, where many old vines survive to produce distinctive, concentrated wines. Ryan Sherman, winemaker/partner at Fields Family Wines in Acampo, crafts his Sherman Family Vineyards Old Vine Zinfandel from 65-year-old vines. His 2012 vintage is listed in the 2014 Top 100 *San Francisco Chronicle* wines.

On an innovative track, Sherman produced Zinfandel Nouveau for the first time in 2015 in the fresh style of Beaujolais Nouveau.



“I find similarity with zinfandel and gamay grapes. You can make wines light, pretty and ethereal, as in Nouveau, or deeper, richer and more structured,” says Sherman.

Michael Bright, manager of Papapavlo's Bistro & Bar in nearby Stockton, recommends zinfandel from Fields Family Wines or Oak Farm Vineyards with dishes such as lamb chops. “Over 20 years, we have watched people become more aware of Lodi,” says Bright, who also sells Holdener's Mischievous Zinfandel, one of the 15 zinfandels in the Macchia portfolio.

Other Lodi reds are also highly regarded. At Terry B's, Roe listed Michael David Winery's Freakshow cabernet sauvignon, and generated a near-cult following. He pairs LangeTwins Midnight Reserve Bordeaux blend with braised short ribs with root vegetable polenta, and now lists six LangeTwins labels. Bright pairs Oak Farm cabernet with pork tenderloin in pepper plum sauce at Papapavlo's.

Italian varietals thrive in Lodi. Macchia Wines barbera has won numerous awards, including first place in the International Barbera Competition with its 2006 Righteous Barbera.

Winemakers outside Lodi vie for the best Lodi grapes. Rhône specialist Randall Graham, owner/winemaker of Bonny Doon Vineyard in Santa Cruz, has purchased cinsault from the Bechthold Vineyard for years. “[These vines] are exceptional, largely in virtue of their hoary age. Most of the limited amount of fruit we are allocated goes into our Le Cigare Volant blend.” As a special wine club bottling, he also produces a Cinsaut [sic]-Counoise blend.

Spencer's father Tim, founder of St. Amant Winery, enjoyed port, and he planted Portuguese grape varieties for it. With one of the first tasting rooms in Lodi, the winery also produces barbera—Spencer's “pizza wine”—and highly regarded Marian's Vineyard Old Vine Zinfandel. Because of Lodi's key role supplying grapes and wine during Prohibition, St. Amant Winery produces a Speak-easy red blend.

White Lodi grapes also shine

Graham has also purchased Lodi moscato giallo and grenache blanc. “The region seems to be more successful with its white grapes than its reds,” he says.

Oak Farm Vineyards' 2014 Albariño won the Best of Show White Wine award at the California State Fair in 2015. Oak Farm is a newer Lodi winery, opened in 2009 by the Panella family.



TOP RIGHT: m2 Wines tasting room
BOTTOM, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 1) Harney Lane Zinfandel Lizzy James label 2) Michael David Winery zinfandel grapes 3) Lodi Native wines

Dan Panella, owner/assistant winemaker, notes that sauvignon blanc and chardonnay are sold on the premises. Tievoli red blend is also gaining traction.

Acquiesce Winery in Acampo sells only white wine, and owner Susan Tipton offers food pairings. “People in the wine business locally said, ‘You’ll never sell whites here.’ I thought, if it doesn’t sell, I’ll drink it,” Tipton says. But her wines sell well, including the picpoul blanc, which she serves with manchego cheese grated on tomatoes with fresh rosemary and extra-virgin olive oil.

German grapes such as kerner, bacchus and riesling produced by wineries that include Borra Vineyards in Lodi are well-received. Portuguese varietal verdelho is also appearing on sommeliers’ lists. Hon at Sepia notes that Scholium Project “Naucratis” made with Lodi verdelho pairs well with the restaurant’s arctic char entree.

Lodi's family focus

In 1907, Jorja Lerner’s great-grandfather planted grapes—and watermelons—when Lodi was the Watermelon Capital of the World. Today, Lerner and husband Kyle own Harney Lane Winery. The name reflects the road leading to the winery and her grandfather’s house, where her mother still lives. Harney Lane makes a variety of wines, including highly regarded old vine zinfandel, tempranillo and albariño.

Jeff Farthing, assistant winemaker, introduces Michael David Winery by telling the story of World War II veteran Grandpa Don Phillips, who built the tasting room and cafe space. Though Phillips Farm was originally known mainly for pumpkins, the family launched Michael David, named for Don’s grandsons, in 1982. The largest of the Lodi-based wineries, Michael David sells 7 Deadly Zins, America’s fastest-growing brand, according to Nielsen data. “We make about 28 wines with eight zins. But these aren’t finesse wines—they are Michael David wines,” says Farthing.

Known for ripe, fruity zinfandels, Michael David also makes cinsault from vines planted in 1885. The winery is expanding for additional storage and production.

With an optimistic eye on the region, Bright of Papapavlo’s says, “Vintners are producing great wines with good labels, and spending money on their wineries.”

Liscio at Bin 14 may list additional Lodi wines. “Lodi has the climate to make old vine zinfandel approachable for everyday palates while keeping the wine geeks happy,” he says.

Oak Farm’s Panella adds that Lodi wines are usually well-made, bright, user-friendly and approachable, at a fair price. These attributes are harvesting accolades. Named wine region of the year by *Wine Enthusiast*, Lodi is also hosting the 2016 Wine Bloggers Conference in July.

Reflecting on the pride of small Lodi wineries, Holdener says, “Since we can’t beat the big guys with quantity, we showcase the quality of fruit in the appellation.” ■

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LODI NATIVE WINE SERIES

About 20% of California’s premium wine production is from Lodi. An innovative project called Lodi Native from the Lodi Winegrape Commission (LoCA) serves to demonstrate the quality and depth of wine—specifically zinfandel—from the region.

Six wineries produce zinfandel under the Lodi Native label using the same winemaking philosophy with minimal intervention, reflecting the diverse terroir where the grapes grow. Camron King, executive director of the commission, says, “Lodi Native allows consumers, trade and media to discover how each vineyard tastes—it’s a community effort with a thread to tie Lodi history and quality together.”

A key component of the project is the careful selection of vineyards by the wineries. The winemaking protocols specify picking grapes from old vine plantings (pre-1962) in a single, contiguous vineyard, with the exception of old plantings with mixed grapes. Also, vineyards should be farmed under the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing or be certified organic by California Certified Organic Farmers. Only native yeasts are used, with no new oak or oak chips or other additions, filtering or fining.

Moreover, notes Catherine Fallis, author and wine consultant at www.planetgrape.com, the Lodi Native series wines are made from sites that are multigenerational. “[These wines] are a real treasure—Grand Cru American Zinfandel, pure, simple, unadorned, yet rich, complex and layered.”

The Lodi Native wines, with selected vineyards from St. Amant, Macchia, m2 Wines, Fields Family Wines, McCay Cellars and Maley Brothers, are available as a six-pack at the Lodi Wine & Visitors Center and through the LoCA online wine store.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Bonny Doon Vineyard Cinsaut Cunoise blend; Michael David Winery 7 Deadly Zins and Freakshow; Oak Farm Vineyards Tievoli red blend; St. Amant Marian's Zinfandel