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Lodi's lode

2003 St. Amant Marian's Vineyard Old Vines Lodi Zinfandel

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In a bald-faced attempt to get publicity for its Zinfandel, the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission initiated an annual competition last year to identify the 12 best Zins from the appellation.

Often these kinds of efforts fall flat, but in this case the Lodi growers have succeeded in drawing publicity to some fairly stunning Zins.

If you don't know Lodi, that's understandable.

It's in the Central Valley between Stockton and Sacramento, but has a subtly different climate, the result of its perch on the edge of the Sacramento River Delta. Due west from Lodi on California 12 is Rio Vista, a town beloved of windsurfers for its blasting morning and evening breezes.

These ease the heat of the baking Central Valley summer, creating a perfect climate for Zinfandel grapes – powerful fruit with enough integrated tannins to create a balanced wine.

Couple the weather with acres of 100-year-old vines and you have the prescription for five-star wine.

St. Amant's Marian's Vineyard comes from a low-yielding 1901 plot on the Mohr-Fry Ranch. Winemaker Tim Spencer hand-sorted, destemmed and crushed the grapes in open-top fermenters, then barrel-aged for 10 months.

The result is a thick, jammy blockbuster with blackberry, boysenberry and blueberry fruit spiced with coffee, cocoa and cinnamon. There's a modest bite of tannin on the finish to help balance the fruit.

This wine clocks in at 15.8 percent alcohol - which sounds too high - but the powerful fruit and thick body give it so much balance that the high alcohol doesn't register on the palate.

I give it my highest rating and a warning – only 240 cases produced.

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