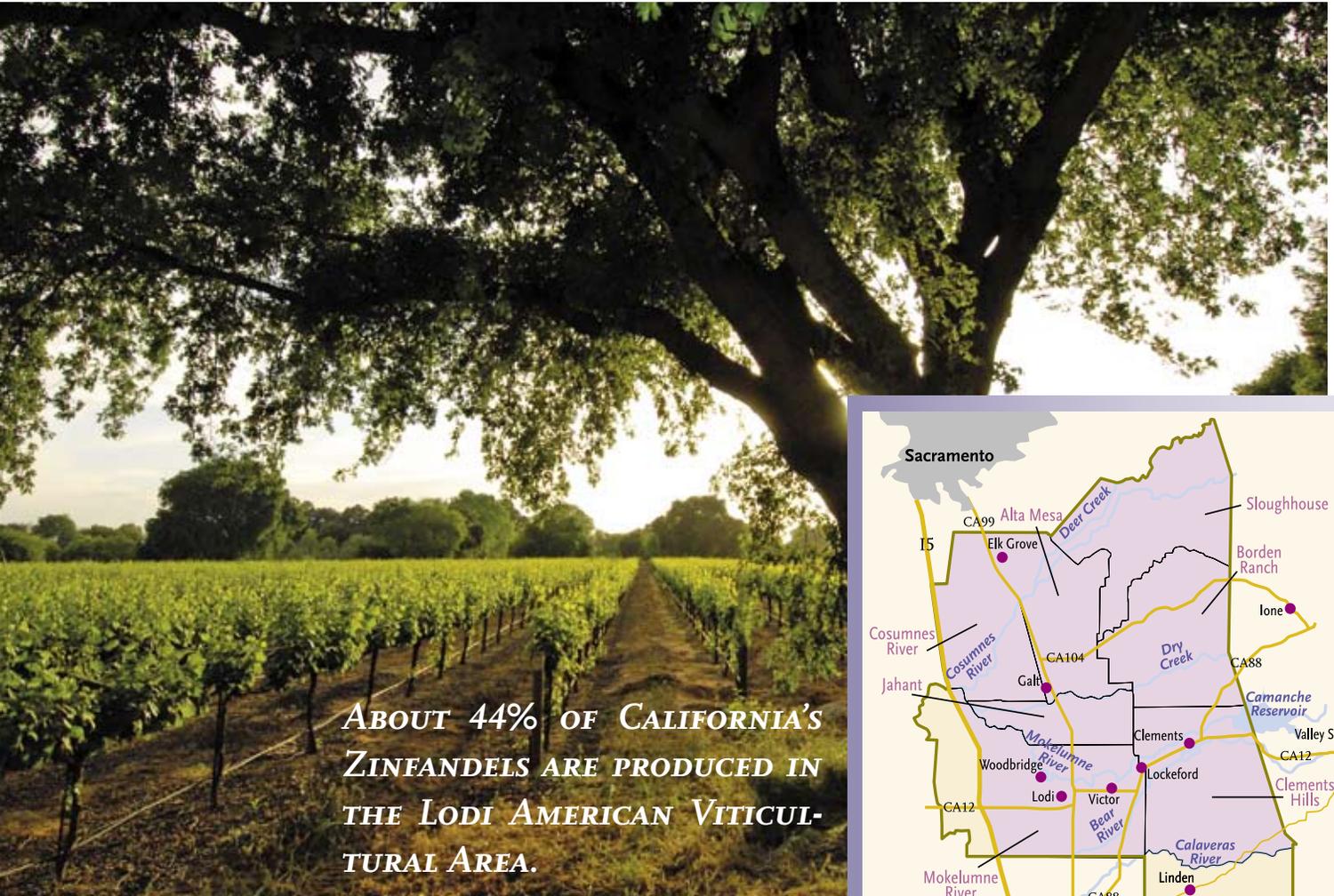


Mokelumne River

Lodi, California



ABOUT 44% OF CALIFORNIA'S ZINFANDELS ARE PRODUCED IN THE LODI AMERICAN VITICULTURAL AREA.



LangeTwins Winery and Vineyard, Mokelumne River (top).

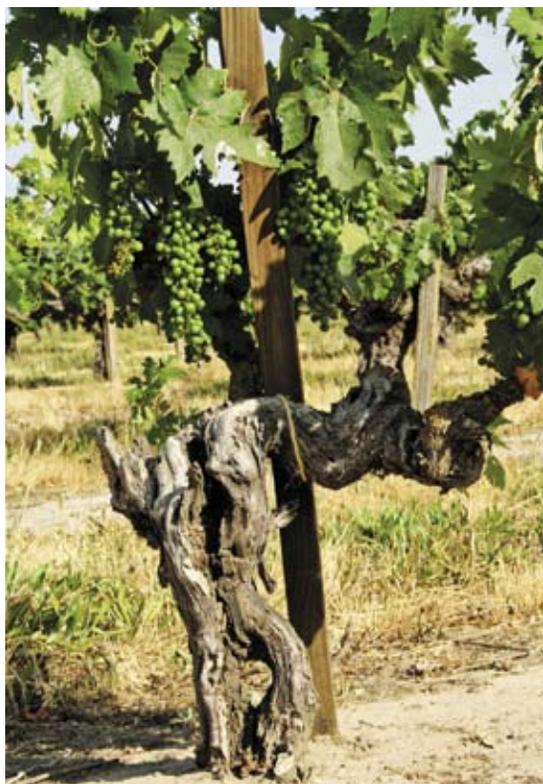
RANDY CAPAROSO



And almost all of that is grown in Lodi's historic heart and soul: the Mokelumne River, one of the seven recently established Lodi sub-AVAs. In fact, Mokelumne River is the source of many of California's finest, richest Zinfandels. That may come as a surprise, because the emergence of ultra-premium-quality Lodi Zinfandel is another recent development, driven by growers-turned-winemakers—a dynamic not unlike what France's Champagne region has recently undergone. Although the cream of Mokelumne River's crop is still bottled under the broader Lodi appellation, the name of this new AVA will soon be on the lips of every sommelier and serious wine lover.

The Mokelumne River (pronounced MOH-kull-a-me by the locals) originates in the nearby Sierra Nevadas and empties into the San Joaquin River. The intrinsic power and intensity of Mokelumne River wines are a reflection of the appel-

Photo by Charlene Lange



A Mohr-Fry Ranches Zinfandel vine, planted in 1901.



Jerry Fry of Mohr-Fry Ranches.

lation's low elevation (0-100 feet) and Mediterranean climate, strongly influenced by its direct proximity to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, which draws cool air from the San Francisco Bay even during the dog days of summer. Mokelumne River is the coolest of the Lodi AVAs; recent readings put its University of California-Davis climate classification (a measurement of average temperatures over 50°F during the growing season) well within Region III—slightly cooler than the Napa Valley floor between St. Helena and Calistoga, and closer to the classic Oakville and Rutherford AVAs in heat summation.

Unlike Oakville and Rutherford, however, Mokelumne River is not about Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, and for two good reasons: its deep (8-30 feet), fertile, yet extremely well-drained, sandy, alluvial soil (classified as Tokay fine sandy loam); and the dominating presence of old-vine Zinfandel, along with lesser amounts of Petite Sirah and Carignan. Although modern vineyard technology calls for controlled irrigation, ample rainfall and soil-moisture retention have always allowed for successful dry farming throughout the Mokelumne basin. Because the vines are neither thirsty nor excessively vigorous, many of the vineyards have been able to thrive in this balanced, natural ecosystem for more than 100 years.

When they say “old vine” in Mokelumne River, they do not mean any ol’ vines. Most wine professionals are unaware that these porous, sandy soils have always been inhospitable to the phylloxera that wreaked havoc elsewhere around the world at the end of the 19th century. This explains why at least 5,000 of Mokelumne River's 42,000 planted acres still sit on their own rootstocks, representing one of the largest stands of ungrafted *Vitis vinifera* in the world.

Close to a quarter of Mokelumne River's plantings went into the ground more than 40 years ago, but some of the most significant sites date back even further, to the 1880s (Jesse's Grove), 1901 (Mohr-Fry Ranches' Marian's Vineyard), 1915 (Klinker Brick's Old Ghost blocks), and 1916 (Soucie Vineyard), with numerous other highly productive vineyards having been planted between the 1920s and 1940s. Of course, most of these are gnarly, free-standing, head-trained vines, yielding perhaps 1-2.5 tons per acre. And everyone knows what deep-rooted, old vines can produce: the types of reds Zinfandel lovers love most, with colors that are black as night and flavors that are ultra-rich yet balanced, even at high-octane tannin and alcohol levels.

Most of Lodi's 750 or so independent growers come from third-, fourth-, or fifth-generation families. The first Lodi winery (called El Pinal) and vineyards were established in 1858; by the 1980s, however, there were still fewer than 25 wineries in the region. The bulk of the grapes went directly into pipelines supplying the likes



Photo courtesy of Lodi Winegrape Commission (left)

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

of E. & J. Gallo and Woodbridge by Robert Mondavi (the latter, himself, a Lodi native). But as the global wine glut began to diminish grape prices, the growers decided to take matters into their own hands, pooling \$250,000 in 1991 to form the Lodi Winegrape Commission, which, during the past decade, has operated with an annual budget closer to \$1 million. Going one step further—both as a matter of survival and to preserve a quality that was largely lost in bulk bottlings—many of these old-time growers began to establish their own wineries. Today, there are more than 70 in Lodi.

One success story: Michael-David Winery, owned by Michael and David Phillips, whose family has been growing grapes, as well as fruits and vegetables, on the same land since 1860. Ten years ago, the Phillips brothers were still crushing only about 1,000 cases a year; today, their production is closer to 300,000 cases. Labels such as Earthquake, 7 Deadly Zins, Windmill, and Incognito are selling out in every state and beyond, while racking up Best of Show awards like nobody's business.

Another step forward was the growers' proposal to divide the Lodi AVA into seven subappellations, more clearly defining the diversity of Lodi terroirs. In 2006, these AVAs met final approval: Mokelumne River, still the source of more than half of Lodi's production; the slightly warmer, delta-influenced Jahant, Cosumnes River, and Alta Mesa AVAs to the north; and the rolling, rockier, higher-elevation Sloughouse, Borden Ranch, and Clements Hills AVAs to the east, where Lodi transitions into the Sierra Foothills.

Bruce Fry's Mohr-Fry Ranches is a classic Mokelumne River growth, located just south of the town of Lodi, near the center of the AVA. Much of Fry's vineyard is own-rooted in 20-30 feet of nearly pure sand, with a permeable "lime lens" running at a depth of 4-5 feet in some of the older blocks. Underground drip, installed just 10 years ago, has helped reinvigorate Fry's oldest plantings (some 101 years old), which are still farmed to yield just 1.5-2.5 tons per acre.

Mohr-Fry is also one of 17 vineyards farmed in accordance with the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing, instituted by the Lodi Winegrape Commission in 2005 to recognize growers who go beyond responsible pest management by practicing biodiversity in promoting soil and water health (whether organically or synthetically), as well as human safety. The Lodi Rules are the first appellation-wide sustainable standards in California.

I compared the nuances of Mokelumne River terroir and old-vine Zinfandel in a tasting of wines from Mohr-Fry Ranches (see box), using Riedel Vinum Bordeaux stems. More sommeliers should join me. 🍷

Joel Gott Zinfandel Mohr-Fry Ranches	2005	\$18
From a selection of 50- to 80-year-old head-pruned vines, this ruby-red wine shows plenty of black-cherry, raspberry, and cola-like aromas and flavors, but without nearly the intensity and seamlessness of the younger bottlings in this tasting. The body is big (the label says 14.5% alcohol, but it tastes closer to 15%), the tannins slightly drying, and, typical of Mokelumne River growths, the peppery-clove varietal spice is muted, but enhanced by moderately toasted American and French oak. It's made for drinking now, as it will probably not improve.		
Valhalla Cellars Zinfandel Mohr-Fry Ranches Old Vine	2005	\$20
Culled from a 70-year-old section yielding a decidedly deeper nose than the Joel Gott—the black cherry veering into blueberry and dried plum—and a mouthfeel that is plusher, more velvety, and more luxuriously fruited. Sixty percent new French oak combines with subdued varietal spice to produce smoky, roasted-coffee tones; well-rounded tannins bolster the otherwise softly textured fruit, which manages to establish itself despite the wine's gargantuan size (15.8% alcohol). At its best right now.		
St. Amant Zinfandel Mohr-Fry Ranches Old Vine	2006	\$16
From a meticulously sorted, 64-year-old block that expresses the terroir with even deeper raspberry- and blueberry-pie aspects. The almost framboise-like concentration in the nose gives a velvety, sensuously layered, explosively fruit-forward feel on the palate. Prototypically Mokelumne River—neither overripe nor prune, soft, and intoxicating in sheer, aromatic fruitiness rather than in alcohol (15.8%), tannin, or oak. At peak intensity now, and perhaps for another year or two.		
St. Amant Zinfandel Marian's Vineyard Old Vine	2006	\$24
As with the '05 Valhalla and '06 St. Amant bottlings, this titillating cuvée demonstrates the approachability of even the oldest-vine Mokelumne River Zinfandels in their youth. From an 8.3-acre block, planted in 1901, that usually yields less than 1.5 tons per acre, it shows an even more powerful, tightly fistled blackberry concentration in the nose—in contrast to the blueberry-raspberry tones of Fry's 40- to 70-year-old plantings—combined with a more compact, multi-layered structure. With nary a rough edge or a hint of Port-like sweetness, this wine is amazingly well balanced, despite the preponderance of insanely rich, purplish, juicy fruitiness and seemingly over-the-top alcohol (16.4%), promising a pleasure threshold that will likely extend for another three to four years.		
St. Amant Zinfandel Mohr-Fry Ranches Old Vine	2007	\$18
At not quite a year old, this wine is tighter in the nose—give it another year to bang out of the glass, as the '06 is doing now—but the sweet blueberry- and raspberry-jam aromas are more than evident, underscored by vanillin oak and hints of peppercorn spice. Nothing hidden on the palate: huge, plump, brimming flavors of raspberry jam, densely packed with generous, youthful tannins; and nothing but fruit in the feel: lush, juicy, and dripping. Will be better next year and up to 2011.		
St. Amant Zinfandel Marian's Vineyard Old Vine	2007	\$24
As in the '06 vintage, the 2007 edition of the 107-year-old Marian's Vineyard shows less fat and more muscle, more pervasive viscosity, more succulence without the sweetness, and a decidedly blacker-berry concentration than the "younger" old-vine blocks. The nose is still shy, but liqueur-like in fruit intensity. Everything is in place on the palate: a velvety mouthful (15.5% alcohol) of blackberry flavor that is amazingly lithe, even finesseful, and endless on the finish, despite the excesses of youth. I suspect that the more even-keeled qualities of this vintage will allow the '07 Marian's to evolve nicely for six or seven more years.		
Prices are estimated retail.		

Randy Caparoso is a career wine professional and restaurant consultant. He is a founding partner and former vice president and corporate wine director of Roy's Restaurant Group. In 1998, he was named Sante's first Restaurant Wine & Spirits Professional of the Year; in 1992 and 1999, he was Restaurant Wine's Wine Marketer of the Year. He is a Contributing Editor of Sommelier Journal.