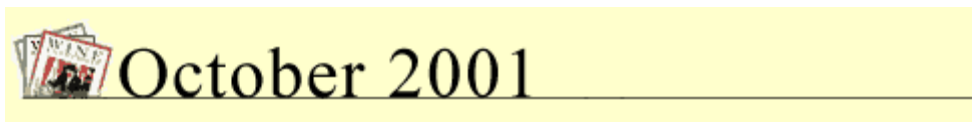


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Looking at Lodi

BY STEVE HEIMOFF

The Lodi wine scene is heating up—and it's not because of global warming.

If you ever meet someone from Lodi, don't mention that old Creedence Clearwater line, "Oh, lord, I'm stuck in Lodi again."

Every one of Lodi's 52,000 residents has heard it before, and not a single one of them finds it amusing. The fact is, Lodians are rightfully proud of their trim, tidy, all-American city, with its wide, tree-lined streets and colorful downtown banners that proclaim "Lodi: The Place to Be."

On the other hand, there is a tendency among local winemakers to be a trifle defensive about the weather. Even as avid a booster of the area as Mark Chandler, head of the Lodi Winegrape Commission, was a little chagrined during my visit, when it was 105 degrees in the shade, and the official line about those "cooling Delta breezes" was sounding hollow.

They also know that, as a result, they have an image problem. Some people think that Lodi, located in California's Central Valley, is too hot for fine wine. They know that the 458,000-acre American Viticultural Area (AVA) is classified by the University of California at Davis as a Region 4 grape-growing district, meaning it's much warmer than the world's best wine regions.

Despite the heat, a new generation of Lodi growers and vintners is gearing up to show the world what they can do. They're unimpressed by what they refer to as "Napasonoma," which is just 50 miles away, and they see no reason why Lodi shouldn't be as major a wine player. And residents are not alone in their high regard for the region's potential: Suddenly and improbably, Lodi has buzz, and some pretty prestigious coastal wineries want Lodi grapes.

Old Zin Puts Lodi on the Map

Lodi is best known for its ancient Zinfandel vines, many of which were planted before the turn of the last century. Although no one keeps official count of these head-pruned beauties, Lodi may have more of them than anywhere else. What put Lodi on the map, in fact, were old-vine Zins from such coastal wineries as Robert Biale, Turley, Wild Hog, Kenwood, Rosenblum and Ravenswood.

"I wasn't even familiar with Lodi five years ago, but we went out and looked around," says Kenwood's winemaker, Mike Lee. "Hell, they get [only] three tons an acre, and that's where the action is." Rich Kanakarlis, the proprietor of Monterey-based Pavona Vineyards, adds, "Lodi old-vine Zin is killer. Those vines produce really concentrated fruit. That's why Lodi is now being recognized as a great wine area."

Lodi is dominated by its grape growers, a landed aristocracy reminiscent of the cotton barons of the Old South. Some are fourth- or fifth-generation farmers whose mansions sit amid sprawling vineyard plantations of thousands of acres. Most of these families have similar histories: Great-great grandpa sailed around the Cape to San Francisco during the Gold Rush and wound up farming in Lodi, which, 150 years ago, was a gateway to the miners' camps of the Sierra Foothills.

A generation or two later, a second cousin somewhere planted winegrapes. By the 1960s, Gallo was buying up practically everything in the region for its blending tanks in Modesto, 30 miles to the south. In the 1980s, Robert Mondavi settled the headquarters for his huge Woodbridge brand in Lodi and became an important buyer. Vendange, Fetzer, Delicato, Franzia, Canandaigua, Glen Ellen and other large producers likewise turned to Lodi for a steady stream of anonymous fruit, and in the event made the growers rich.

Lodi became the Midi of California, a sprawling region producing millions of gallons of wine destined for jugs and inexpensive, California-labeled fighting varietals. But then something unexpected happened: A proud young generation came along and revolutionized the local industry.

The Boutique Bandwagon

David Lucas was the first winemaker to start a boutique winery in Lodi. Fresh out of the Peace Corps, he made his 1978 Lucas Zinfandel from a 20-acre vineyard planted in the 1930s. Lucas pampered his vines like babies and proved that Lodi could produce an expensive wine that people would buy. He was also the first to print the word "Lodi" on his labels, even though the region didn't get official AVA status until 1986.

Slowly at first, then like a torrent, others jumped on the winemaking bandwagon, and garnered critical approval for their wines. Today, more and more growers are saving five or ten percent of their grapes with which to test the premium winemaking waters.

So great is the rush to open wineries that the Winegrape Commission's Chandler recently got a first-in-the-nation grant to teach growers-turned-vintners how to market, distribute, promote and export their wines. "I get a call a week from my growers saying they want to start a winery, and I know they need this," he says. Adds Steve Carson, the 27-year-old winemaker at Vino Con Brio, "When all those outside wineries started buying Lodi grapes and making money, a lot of people here figured, 'I can do the same thing myself.'"

One of the area's newest grower-vintners is Keith Watts, whose Watts Winery got startup permission from the government in June 2001. A relative newcomer—he's only a second-

generation Lodian—Watts, 32, and his family are still selling most of their grapes to the likes of Woodbridge and Kendall-Jackson. But this year the Wattses bottled 750 cases of their 1999 Old Vine Zinfandel just to see what would happen. “It’s a huge gamble,” Watts says, “but if it’s successful, we’ll grow.”

Like some of his colleagues, Watts isn’t quite ready to build a winery: It’s far too expensive for a venture that might not last. Instead, he’s making his wine at a custom crush facility, Vino Piazza, the brainchild of Don Litchfield, an entrepreneur with a background in environmental cleanup. In 1998, Litchfield bought an abandoned winery in Lockeford, ten miles from Lodi, with the intention of renting it out for light industry.

Instead, Chandler persuaded him to create a space where local startup wineries like Watts could, for a fee, make and retail wine. After investing hundreds of thousands of dollars in the project, Litchfield says “we’ve gotten over that ‘Will they come?’ anxiety.” He’s already sold 12 leases—about half the number of Lodi wineries—and gives credit to Napa Valley veteran Mitch Cosentino, who’s making his Crystal Valley brand at Vino Piazza, for giving the project credibility.

If any Lodi vineyard has caught the public’s attention, it’s Mohr-Fry, which appears as a vineyard designation on the labels of at least 20 wineries. Bruce Fry, a 28-year-old fourth-generation Californian (Mohr was his grandmother’s maiden name) explains that Mohr-Fry is actually a series of ranches comprising 700 planted acres scattered throughout Lodi, including some 1901-era Zinfandel vines. Fry’s dad, Jerry, got tired of seeing those precious grapes disappear into someone else’s fermentation tanks.

According to Fry, “He knew those vines could make a wonderful red wine, so he started making some phone calls about [other wineries] doing a Zin.” Many of them jumped at the chance, including Vigil, Eola Hills and Chouinard, and their Mohr-Fry bottlings have gone a long way toward increasing Lodi’s visibility. Yet so far, the Frys have cautiously decided to stay out of the winemaking game. “It would be fun to do something small, but I don’t know when or how,” Fry says.



Too Hot for Good Grapes?

Perhaps the biggest problem the new vintners have is overcoming those stubborn perceptions that Lodi is too hot. Ironically, it's not only consumers who hold these views, it's also distributors who get the wine from producers and, in turn, pass it on to wine shops and restaurants. Stuart Spencer, who, with his dad, Tim, owns a local winery, St. Amant, says he's been told that coastal wineries who use Lodi grapes are explicitly warned by their distributors not to use the "Lodi" appellation on their labels, for fear of turning consumers off. Says Lance Randolph, who proudly displays the Lodi name on his Peirano Estate wines, "I've had large [coastal] wineries tell me A.B.L.—Anything But Lodi—on the label."

Strangely, this view also is held by some of the area's biggest wineries. Kurt Kautz, who runs a large custom crush facility, Bear Creek, in Lodi, and whose family owns the 250,000-case Ironstone Vineyards in the Sierra Foothills, says, "The current thought in distribution and marketing is that [the preferred A.V.A.] is still 'California,'" not Lodi. Jon Moramarco, CEO of giant Canandaigua Wine, whose Turner Road production facility in Lodi turns out 7 million cases a year under various labels that sport a "California" appellation, agrees. "It's a possibility" that his brands may use the Lodi AVA at some point in the future, he says, "but we have no short-term plans to do that."

Brad Alderson, Woodbridge's vice president and general manager, concedes that his winery, too, has shied away from printing "Lodi" on labels, although that is slowly changing. On the bottles that Woodbridge exports to Europe, Alderson points out, they do use the Lodi AVA, "because Europeans haven't heard all those stories about the Central Valley."

If You're Going

Lodi is mid-America set in California's Central Valley. Summertime can be a real scorcher, so be prepared. Spring and fall are pleasant and warm, while the brief winters can see rain and wind. Wine tasting is a major draw: About a dozen wineries have tasting rooms, with more opening all the time. Many local wineries have music and other festivals during the warm season. Contact the **Lodi Wine & Visitor Center** at **209/367-4727** or **www.lodiwine.com**, or the **Lodi Winery Association** at **800/700-LODI**.

Besides wine tasting, there are many recreational activities in Lodi, especially in summer. Downtown makes for pretty strolling, with antique shops and boutiques. The well-equipped library downtown is a cool stop on a hot July afternoon. The educational **Wine & Visitor Center** is worth a visit, and so is Lodi Lake, where, on warm days, half the town turns out for swimming, picnicking, and outdoor sports. There's skydiving at Lodi Airport, animals at Micke Grove Zoo, birdwatching and fishing on the beautiful Mokelumne River, and days spent lazily boating, hiking and swimming in the Delta region. Some travelers use Lodi as a base for short jaunts to gold country, the High Sierras and Yosemite National Park.

The most popular places to stay are the **Wine & Roses Country Inn** and **Angel House**, both in Lodi. In nearby Lockeford is the Locke House B&B. Good restaurants include, in Lodi, the **Wine & Roses Country Inn**, **Cottage Bakery Cafe**, and **Hazel's**. The tiny hamlet of Woodbridge, only a few minutes' drive from downtown Lodi, is worth a visit for a handful of antique

shops as well as two good restaurants, **Woodbridge Inn Steakhouse** and **Woodbridge Feed & Fuel**.

In point of fact, summer's high temperatures in Lodi *are* high, but are not that high compared to other places. For example, on the day that it was 105P in Lodi, it was 102P in Napa City, and three or four degrees hotter than that in Oakville, Calistoga and the warmest parts of Sonoma Valley.

Lodi is indeed cooled by those "Delta breezes" that come through the Carquinez Straits from San Francisco Bay, though Kenwood's Mike Lee notes, "Lodi may be one of the cooler places in the Central Valley, but the real cooling breezes come into Napa-Sonoma." Lodi can have a very great diurnal, or 24-hour, temperature swing, with the thermometer sinking down to the mid-50s at night, which is why Lodi grapes, for all their sunny ripeness, maintain adequate levels of acidity. Zinfandel remains Lodi's superstar varietal, but other full-bodied red grapes, including Syrah, Petite Sirah and Barbera also have promise. (Woodbridge's Alderson believes Barbera will be Lodi's first luxury-wine superstar.) Sauvignon Blanc also has potential. Although no one doubts that Lodi is inappropriate for cool- weather-loving Pinot Noir, its best Chardonnays can be rich and complex.

As for Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, there's disagreement, even among Lodians themselves. "In my own personal opinion, I don't think that viticulturally, those grapes can produce the highest quality of wine in Lodi," says St. Amant's Tim Spencer. He chooses his words carefully, because he doesn't want to tick off neighbors who have chosen to plant Cabernet. Notes Cosentino, "You don't think of Lodi as an area [Cabernet] would be best in, but our lots look extremely good, if not overcropped...that's a big issue."

Old-Fashioned Versus New-Fangled Winemaking Techniques

In fact, the key to increasing the quality of Lodi's Cabernets and other varieties is to improve vineyard practices. The region's biggest grower, fourth-generation Lodian Randy Lange, who, with his brother Brad, farms 6,000 acres for Lange Twins Farm Management Company, loves nothing better than to experiment with new viticultural techniques. In the old days, Lange says, when Gallo was paying \$80 a ton for grapes, it didn't make financial sense to invest time and money in the vineyard, but now, with the best grapes topping \$1,000 a ton, it does. For this increase, the tall, cowboy-hatted Lange gives credit to the Mondavis and Woodbridge. "The thing about the Mondavis that changed the district is, they brought the grower in as a joint partner," he observes. The Mondavis imported viticultural know-how into Lodi, and smarter growers realized the importance of learning the new-fangled techniques.

Old-timers, on the other hand, tended to resist. Today, many still employ farming techniques that are out-of-date and result in lower-quality wines. A lot of them continue to sell their grapes to the old co-op facility on Highway 12, which, since 1934, has produced inexpensive wines under labels like Oak Ridge and Conti Royale. How retro is the co-op? Many of the brands still call their wines Port, Sherry and Chablis.

A Case of Lodi's Best

93 St. Amant 1999 Mohr-Fry Marian's Vineyard Zinfandel (Lodi); \$24.
Smells intense, with blueberry, vanilla, cassis and smoke aromas and a sweet, caramelized note. In the mouth, this is an absolute winner. Soft, succulent and

very complex, with wild berry and peppery-spice flavors. **Editors' Choice.**

91 Jessie's Grove 1998 Westwind Old Vine Reserve Zinfandel (Lodi); \$22. Textbook Lodi Zin, with complex aromas of blackberry, blueberry, bay leaf and smoke. Rich and fine, with cascades of spicy fruit flavors and elaborate structure. Very dry, with big, dusty tannins and a lusty finish.

90 Jewel 1999 Duetto (Lodi); \$10. Begins with lovely black-cherry aromas that are delicate, smoky and inviting. There's lots of pretty fruit in the mouth suggesting cassis and plums, along with crisp acidity and a tannic backbone. A blend of Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon. **Best Buy.**

90 Lucas 1999 Chardonnay (Lodi); \$18. Almost like French Chablis, with its anise, vanilla, and mineral aromas suggesting slate and metal. Austere by coastal standards, the citrus and mineral flavors are framed by lush sweet oak and enhanced by lees aging. Soft and delicate, yet powerful. **Editors' Choice.**

89 L'Uvaggio di Giacomo 1999 Il Gufo Barbera (Lodi); \$15. Shows the promise of this variety, especially from old vines. Rich, powerful blackberry jam, espresso, plum and olive aromas lead to a big, tannic, crisply acidic wine with lots of structure. A massive core of plum and berry fruit indicates ageability. **Editors' Choice.**

89 Peirano 1998 Six Clones Merlot (Lodi); \$11. Plum, currant, rhubarb pie and smoke aromas lead to a softly fruity, gentle wine in the mouth. The flavors of wild berries and tree fruits are wrapped in velvety smooth tannins. A supple, easy-drinking wine. **Best Buy.**

89 Stefan Daniels 1999 Lockeford Syrah (California); \$20. Although it carries a California label, the Lockeford designation is a giveaway. The slightly herbal, black-pepper and rhubarb aromas and tangy berry fruit give little indication of its hot-climate origins, and the meaty, earthy flavors are reminiscent of some Northern Rhône Syrahs. The finish is long and tart, featuring a reprise of black pepper.

88 Rosenblum 2000 Ripkin Vineyard Viognier (Lodi); \$14. From an outside winery but using 100% Lodi grapes from a cooler vineyard, it starts with lemon flower, jasmine, smoky honey and tobacco aromas, and turns rich and flamboyant on the palate. Massive peach and honey flavors lead to a smooth finish. **Best Buy.**

88 Van Ruiten-Taylor 1999 Reserve Chardonnay (Lodi); \$9. Appealing aromas of green apple veer into tropical fruits with vanilla and clove highlights. Lusciously fruity and rich, with a voluptuous, creamy mouthfeel. **Best Buy.**

88 Woodbridge 1998 Old Vine Zinfandel (California); \$12. Starts with inviting aromas of bay leaf, earth and cassis, and turns smooth, soft and supple in the mouth. It's packed with fruity and oriental spice flavors and is dry and clean. This would be delicious and warming on a winter's day. **Best Buy.**

87 Phillips 1999 Syrah (Lodi); \$17. Beautiful aromas, with spiced plum pudding, blackberry jam and smoke. This is a richly extracted wine, with peppery flavors suggesting freshly baked blackberry cobbler. It tastes very dry, with a soft, silky mouthfeel and a long finish.

86 Crystal Valley 2000 Mohr-Fry Ranch Sauvignon Blanc (California); \$13. From this celebrated Lodi vineyard comes a fresh, lively wine, with lemongrass, spearmint, and smoky aromas and citrus and mint flavors. Slightly sweet, but zesty acidity keeps it clean and refreshing.

Says Oak Ridge's production manager, Fred Mettler, "You have some very old-fashioned growers who have been doing the same thing for 40 years and aren't going to change. It's the younger group, or their kids, who are getting into the newer stuff." Yet, as Oak Ridge winemaker Julie Edelstein notes, even the older growers are willing to try something new, as long as it doesn't cost them too much money. Last year, she says, chuckling, "They finally gave us permission to barrel ferment." But it was an uphill battle convincing her growers to pay for the new barrels, Edelstein says.

As happens in most big California appellations when they experience some commercial success, Lodians now are searching for miniterroirs that could result in new subappellations based on variations in rainfall, soil and elevation. At least six potential sites have been found, including the new Borden Ranch area in the appellation's northeast, sector where vast new vineyards are being planted.

Perhaps the rampant optimism in Lodi is best summarized by Nicholas Karavidas, a young winemaker from Cucamonga, in Southern California. The week I visited, he had just packed up his family and moved to Lodi, to concentrate on Borra-Nicholas, his new winery venture. "There is such excitement here," Nicholas says. "There are a lot of focused people who believe that the quality of their fruit can be as high [here] as anywhere. I just want to be part of that."

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