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Loads of promise in Lodi

Nourishing climate and copious sunshine make flavorful wine for under \$20

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Time was, emphasis past tense, when wine drinkers would moan, like the sad sack in the song from Creedence Clearwater Revival, "Oh! Lord, stuck in Lodi again."

For years, Lodi's 100,000 acres of vineyards east of San Francisco turned out rivers of white zinfandel and bag-in-box tittle. Lodi used corks, but it was better at spigots.

Nowadays, Lodi is one of California's better wine places to be stuck in. If you seek terrific reds such as old-vine zinfandel and syrah, or (the great surprise) American whites that hark back hauntingly to Europe's better albarino and vermentino, check out Lodi. The kicker is that much of it retails for \$20 or less a bottle.

Lodi is the Languedoc of the West Coast, a decades-old winemaking engine wary of sacrificing its place in history to the hangover of cheap plonk. As in the Languedoc, imaginative grape growers and winemakers have taken stock of Lodi's native promise — older vines, a nourishing climate and copious sunshine — and now turn out polished versions of what Lodi always offered: whites and especially reds with a lot of flavor for not a lot of coin.

For an area long known as a stronghold of the hardy and hearty red wine grape zinfandel, Lodi has done well by white grapes too. White wine grapes fill out one-third of the vineyard space; they may be strong in the bulk wine department, but some killer whites come now in the single bottle as well.

Perhaps it is its Mediterranean climate — warm days, breezy nights — that coaxes the best from these more fragile grapes, but do not pass them by on a too-quick beeline to Lodi reds.

The 2010 Harney Lane Albarino (\$20) reminds us of the same from the northwest of Spain, especially with its citrusy edge and super-juicy finish. Note the underpinning of minerals and the full-on aromas of cream and lemon in the 2011 Uvaggio Vermentino (\$13-\$15), just as you would get these both in a Ligurian white of similar pedigree.

Randall and Brad Lange choose to use the musque clone for their 2011 LangeTwins Sauvignon Blanc (\$14); there's no mistaking its near New Zealand-like pungency.



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Here are some notes on a few well-priced and well-made Lodi reds, all less than \$25 a bottle, listed by price.

2010 Bogle Vineyards Zinfandel "Old Vine": No better value in centenarian vine zinfandel exists from California, much less from Lodi, than this beauty; gobs of dark red fruit character as if dusted with cocoa powder and baking spice; moderately tannic, clean finish. \$11

2010 d'Art Wines Zinfandel: Dark and brooding, depth of fruit to match (black cherry, black raspberry), with Puglian primitive suggestions of asphalt or scorched wood; big but pretty. \$20-\$24

2010 Klinker Brick Syrah "Farrah": What a terrific wine for the money, all super-ripe, dark fruit spiced with anise and wood (a bit too woody in the nose right now); nicest aspect is its no-finish finish. \$20

2010 m2 Wines Tempranillo "Tormenta": Like a new-age Rioja crianza, all richly-rendered, juicy, bright red fruit spiced with wood, vanilla and cinnamon. \$24

2010 Fields Family Zinfandel "Old Vine Sherman Family Vineyards": Shows why zin freaks never flag on this grape: as dark as a poodle's nose from ripe, super-concentrated red-black fruit (blackberry especially), layered with electric, dynamic aromas and tastes of spice, black pepper and earth, with plush, plump tannins and (yay!) moderate alcohol. \$24

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.