

FOOD & WINE

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The Battle for America's Oldest Vines

BY RAY ISLE

Are vineyards just farmland, or are they cultural treasures? F&W's Ray Isle goes inside the fight to save some of California's oldest grapevines from the bulldozer.

It would be easy to drive by the Salvador Vineyard in Oakley, California, without giving it a second thought. The plot is on a residential backstreet, 10 or so acres of widely spaced, low-growing vines. The plot is on a residential backstreet, 10 or so acres of widely spaced, low-growing vines. The plot is on a residential backstreet, 10 or so acres of widely spaced, low-growing vines. The plot is on a residential backstreet, 10 or so acres of widely spaced, low-growing vines.

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The Salvador vines were planted by Portuguese immigrants in the late 1800s, like most of the vineyards in Contra Costa County, a once-rural area that is now an East Bay commuter suburb. The soil they grow in is sandy, the texture of dunes; the stumpy, gray, knotted vines push their roots down through the sand in order to produce tiny bunches of intensely flavorful grapes.

Passalacqua a slightly

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Turley s come from their value extends far beyond the pe is agricul ture," he says, "instead of agri-business."

That idea—that vineyards like Salvador have cultural value and are, in a way, living links to California's past—is one reason why Passalacqua and several like-minded winemaker and vineyardist friends founded the nonprofit Historic Vineyard Society in 2011. The society has catalogued more than 200 vineyards throughout the state, any number of which are at risk of disappearing. Already, many important old vineyards are gone. In some cases, new owners ripped out the vines and replanted to more popular varieties. That happened recently to a portion of Napa Valley's famed Hayne Vineyard: The new owner pulled out the 60-year-old Petite Sirah vines and

Unlike Contra Costa County, in **Lodi** all you can see is vines, spreading out for miles in every direction, until you glimpse the foothills of the Sierras in the distance. "The whole area right around here is riddled with blocks of ancient vines," Passalacqua said, "planted from 1904 to 1918."

Lodi has thousands of acres of vineyards full of young Zinfandel vines that produce perfectly pleasant fruit, but it also has some remaining patches of very old vines, some of which have the right soil and exposure to create great wines.