

WINE WISDOM

New Wines From Old Vines

by Ed Schwartz

I read a Wall Street Journal wine column a few years ago, in which the writer at this estimable publication chose the best zinfandel in California. I thought the winner had to be a zin from Ridge, Ravenswood, Rancho Zabaco, Grgich Hills, or any of the other great, but usual zinfandel-producing suspects. When I read the name of the best wine, I was surprised to see that it was a Van Ruitan Family Winery old vine zinfandel from Lodi. You could have knocked me over with a grape! That single revelation kick-started my interest in Lodi and its special zinfandels.

Lodi was a very important grape-growing region primarily known for aromatic Tokay and greatly during Prohibition, but it was not developed after 1934. The wineries were in production. At that time, Lodi was the great deal of fortified wines, as well as fortified, sweet wines—and Lodi wines during Prohibition, an Italian immigrant and started shipping grapes to Italian East Coast. A son, Robert Mondavi, went on to greater wine glory.

While Sonoma and Napa and other coastal wine regions were gaining momentum with white wine production, Lodi was struggling to gain a reputation. In 1986, the federal government gave the region its American Viticultural Area (AVA) designation, and much progress was made when America started to recognize California's red wines, for both their great taste and health benefits. Today, Lodi wines are continuously rising in quality and sustainable growing practices. It is home to many small wineries and many grape growers, large and small.

"Old vine" is a term for any older vine variety, but the term is usually attributed to zinfandel. When I see "old vine" on a label, I would expect the term to mean at least 50 years old, but there is no official cut-off date yet. Old vines produce fewer grapes, but those grapes have more concentrated juice. When we taste an old vine zinfandel, we expect a wonderful richness of flavors, both lush and ripe, and a full-bodied finish. The best wines are bold, to be sure, but should not be overly aggressive in the finish. Bring on the old vine wines!

Stuart Spencer, winemaker at St. Amant Winery and the Lodi Winegrape Commission's program director, sums up: "Zinfandel has thrived in the Lodi appellation dating back to the 1800s. Many of these old vineyards still survive today, producing delicious wines widely embraced by wine enthusiasts across the globe. Lodi has the perfect combination of deep, well-drained sandy soils and a classic Mediterranean climate cooled by the delta breezes blowing off San Francisco Bay. This unique combination has allowed these vineyards to consistently produce distinctive wines."

Macchia 2011 "Outrageous" Noma Ranch—grapes for this wine come from vines that are 100-plus years old. Powerful, with a great nose, but this wine won't wrestle you to the ground. With its 16.4 percent alcohol rating, you'll want to sip this beauty slowly.

McGay Cellars 2009 Truluck's—wow! A blast! A lot of rich fruit and earthy tones with big

"Zinfandel has thrived in the Lodi appellation dating back to the 1800s. Many of these old vineyards still survive today, producing delicious wines widely embraced by wine enthusiasts across the globe..."

- Stuart Spencer, Winemaker at St. Amant Winery and the Lodi Winegrape Commission's program director

yard and the and the and nutmeg are apparent. very bold but, while it is big and complex, thanks to some cabernet sauvignon and merlot in the blend, it didn't shake my bones. It did warm my mouth. The bottle sports a black label with a white skull made from bicycle parts.



Family
amb, almost
of clove

ripe plum
off as a bit
d not be
five to ten
e will be

more soft and refreshing.

D'Art 2010—this wine is from two select vineyards, one with 85-year-old vines and one with 55-year-old vines. It has a magnificent full nose with an emphasis on fruit and structure: a well-balanced wine.

Fields Family Wines 2010—a high scoring wine and very concentrated, but it is somewhat restrained—all for the good. The fruit and tannins are in fine balance now. Our wine group loved this one.