



Wine country getaways

Vineyards are nearly ubiquitous in Northern California—but there's always more wine country to explore. Here, we peek inside four notable regions: from young upstarts to fifth-generation, from famous names to hidden treasures.

Salud, dinero y amor!

By Michelle Branton and Matt Larson

Lodi

When you think of California wine country, Lodi may not immediately spring to mind. But it should.

ONLY 25 MILES FROM SOLANO COUNTY, THE LODI APPELLATION HAS NEARLY 800 WINE GRAPE GROWERS AND MORE THAN 70 WINERIES THAT ARE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. With 100,000 acres of wine grapes, Lodi is the largest wine region in the United States. In comparison, Napa has about 46,000 acres, Sonoma 60,000 acres and the entire state of Washington has 30,000 acres.

Lodi is the single largest supplier of wine grapes to Napa and Sonoma valley wineries. Moreover, it produces 90 percent of the world's zinfandel. (Yes, the world.)

Lodi is also the national leader in sustainable viticulture farming practices. Established in 1991, Lodi's Wine Grape Commission spearheaded a sustainable farming program that has been modeled throughout the U.S. Within two years, more than 260 Lodi wine grape growers voluntarily went through the self-assessment workshops in a move toward certification under The Lodi Rules sustainability program.

Producing since the mid-1800s, Lodi is also the oldest wine region in California. Kevin Phillips of Michael-David Winery is a fifth-generation winemaker. "There are lots of multi-generational grape growers here. We've got it in our blood and we're passionate about it because it's still a family business. That's hard to find anywhere else, but you'll find it all over Lodi."

Visiting Lodi, you'll probably discover some lesser-known varietals and will find that most tasting rooms are gratis and staffed by knowledgeable and passionate folks. The Lodi experience is intimate, casual, down-home and completely without pretension. How refreshing!

MICHAEL-DAVID WINERY

Michael-David Winery, which resembles an old-fashioned farm stand—a nod to the winery's farming roots—is the perfect place to start a day of wine tasting, with its charming farmers market and country-style restaurant.

Michael-David is also one of the region's fastest-growing wineries. When Phillips joined the family business in 2002, it sold 15,000 cases a year. Today, it sells more than 315,000 cases.

Phillips attributes the explosive growth to

the quality of their growers. "We're a grower-based winery [and] are focused on true quality production. My growers would tell you that I'm tough to grow for, but they'll also say they grow a superior product and make more money doing it. We're doing everything that the highest-end wineries in Napa are doing. We don't compromise and mix quality levels of grapes."

Michael-David is also focused on sustainable farming; 7 Deadly Zins was the first label certified under The Lodi Rules. "It's hard to get all 72 of our growers through the program," Phillips says, "but our goal is to have all our wines certified Lodi Rules by 2012. It's better for our growers and for our customers." The 2008 vintage will have another six of two dozen labels certified under Lodi Rules.

Michael-David Winery was among the first to market Lodi as a region, celebrating its agricultural roots and unpretentious style of entertaining. "Lodi is about having tasting rooms in the back barn," Phillips says. "These are all farmers and longtime winemakers. They're the real deal." **4580 W. Highway 12, Lodi (209) 368-7384; lodivineyards.com.**

LANGETWINS FAMILY WINERY AND VINEYARDS

In the early 1970s, one century after the Lange family began farming in Lodi, fourth-generation twin brothers Randy and Brad Lange further expanded the family ag business by launching LangeTwins, a vineyard management operation that now comprises more than 7,000 acres with clients such as Woodbridge by Robert Mondavi and Constellation.

In 2003 the Lange twins and their five adult children sat down to envision their future. "We absolutely believe in family heritage and continuity," Brad Lange says. "But we never beat it into [the kids] about continuing the family business."

Fifth generation Joe Lange adds, "Growing up, we didn't know if we wanted to work in the business. But when we got together, we knew that we were better together than apart." Today, all five kids work for LangeTwins.

In 2005, they started a winery intended

STAY

Wine & Roses Inn and Restaurant

2505 W. Turner Road, Lodi (209) 334-6988; winerose.com.

DINE

Feed and Fuel

27 W. Elm St., Lodi (209) 365-1043; feedandfuelrestaurant.com.

School Street Bistro

116 N. School St., Lodi (209) 333-3950; schoolstbistro.com.



PLAY

Macchia spring

release party. May 2-3. Macchiawines.com.

Zinfest.

May 15-17. Zinfest.com.

Jessie's Grove Winery Groovin' in the Grove

concert series. June-August. Jgwinery.com.

Taste of Lodi.

Sept 27. Tasteoflodi.com.

The First Sip.

Nov. 14-15. Lodiwine.com.

GREEN CERTIFICATION

Lodi Rules

For more information about The Lodi Rules certification and sustainable winegrowing visit Lodiwine.com.

to grow right along with the family's future generations. They took an empty pasture and within 10 months had erected a winery and custom crush facility that could process more than 40,000 tons of wine grapes for the Lodi region. LangeTwins winemaker David Akiyoshi helped design the winery. "This facility was built to last and we can grow with it. It represents an investment in the entire Lodi area."

The winery is simply another project in the Lange twins' three-decade ecological conservation portfolio. In 2006, LangeTwins Wine Estates was the first California recipient of the Leopold Conservation award, which recognizes landowners actively committed to environmental conservation. It is reputed to be the most environmentally friendly winery in the U.S.

"Sustainability is about achieving three things," Brad Lange says of the philosophy behind the winery's design and operation. "Being environmentally friendly; socially equitable for consumers and employees; and being economically viable. It's more expensive, but it's the right thing to do."

Photovoltaic solar systems covering the winery's roof provide more than 80 percent of the operation's energy. Also, the footprint has been established for a future fuel cell for auxiliary energy production versus natural gas turbines that would throw noxious emissions into the air. A large eco-friendly water treatment facility is on site, and employee safety is bolstered by factors such as using glycol as coolant in their fermentation tanks compared to the cheaper, more traditionally used ammonia, and by allowing more moving space between the tanks, aisles and stairwells.

The Langes' dedication to sustainable practices has allowed two of their award-winning wines to be certified under Lodi Rules: the 2007 Sauvignon Blanc and 2007 Chardonnay.

At present, wine tasting and tours are by appointment only, but well worth the extra step of calling ahead. **1525 East Jahant Road, Acampo (209) 334-9780; langetwins.com.**

WEB EXCLUSIVE Read about St. Amant Winery and Macchia Winery online at solanomag.com



Clockwise from top left: Wine grapes on the vine in Lodi; the LangeTwins' eco-friendly winemaking facility with extra wide employee-friendly aisles; Kevin Phillips of Michael-David Winery examining the vineyards with his dog; LangeTwins Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot.

