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'The oldest sites are rarely wholly planted to Zinfandel; instead, they are mixed black-grape vineyards, Zinfandel and a small amount of other varieties, including white grape'

Next stop, Lodi

Once seen purely as a backwater for good value wines, Lodi's treasure trove of old vines coupled with adventurous winemakers is throwing up some exciting and complex bottlings. Matt Stamp MS reckons it's time to take Lodi seriously

Lodi at a glance

Total area 202,340ha
Under vine 44,440ha
Sub-AVAs, from north to south Sloughhouse, Cosumnes River, Alta Mesa, Borden Ranch, Jahant, Mokelumne River, Clements Hills
www.lodiwine.com

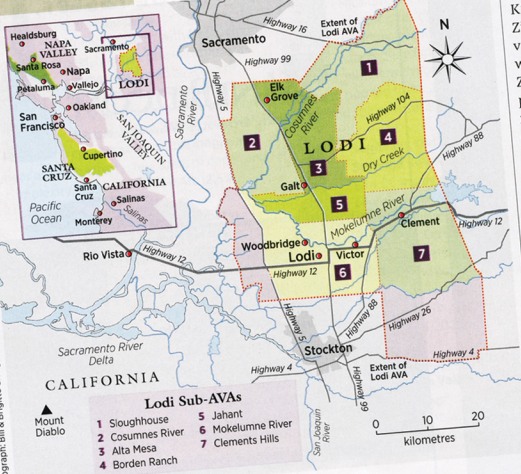
WITH MOUNT DIABLO looming behind us and California's Highway 12 unfolding before us, I headed east with Turley winemaker Tegan Passalacqua, traversing the flat, nearly sea-level San Joaquin Valley, a bread basket between the low coastal mountains and majestic Sierras. Highway 12 is a conduit for northern California's wine regions: the road begins in the west, in the heart of Russian River Valley, crosses Carneros and the southern Napa Valley, skirts the Sacramento River Delta system as it leads due east, and finds its terminus in the old gold country of the Sierra Foothills. On its way, it passes directly through the small, agrarian city of Lodi, our destination. In 1979, something drew Robert Mondavi back to

here, his childhood home, to create the value brand Woodbridge. Passalacqua and other prominent Californian winemakers follow in his footsteps today, drawn to the dirt, vines and potential of Lodi. Yes, this is the home of Woodbridge, Delicato and 7 Deadly Zins, but that's no longer the whole story. 'Lodi's grape-growers may be the best in California,' Passalacqua admits, 'but they aren't the best wine-growers.' Yet they are improving rapidly, and in the region's sandy loam soils there are hidden caches of old, own-rooted vines thriving in the absence of phylloxera. Zinfandel, Lodi's most important quality grape, is especially suited for a ripe old age as it is naturally resistant to eutypa, the 'dead arm' disease that wreaks havoc on many vine varieties in their early adulthood.

Passalacqua himself recently purchased the Kirschenmann Vineyard, with 6ha (hectares) of Zinfandel vines planted in 1915, and makes a vineyard-designate with his fruit for Turley (see wine recommendations box). Other old-vine Zinfandel vineyards are the focus of a new local project, Lodi Native, a six-wine set of single-vineyard, natural-ferment wines produced by six Lodi wineries. One participant, Fields Family's Ryan Sherman, makes a lighter, brighter style of Zinfandel from 1905 vines; another, M2 Cellars, puts forth a much riper, richer style from a site planted in 1916. The oldest vineyards are rarely wholly planted to Zinfandel; instead, they are mixed black-grape vineyards, comprising Zinfandel and a smattering of other varieties, from Carignan and Petite Sirah to teinturiers (red-fleshed as well as red-skinned grapes) and the occasional white grape. There are also a few remaining stands of Flame Tokay, a disappearing variety of Algerian origin entwined with Lodi's heritage. These old, embattled vineyards are drawing attention towards Lodi, and the region is richly endowed: no complete register of such vineyards exists, but Stuart Spencer, winemaker at St Amant, estimates that between 1,200ha and 2,000ha of vines were planted in the Lodi AVA before the 1960s.

d-tested recipe: high alcohol, ample residual sugar. But the outside attention is leading to increased winemaking among locals, and Fields Family. More: only 20% of the Lodi wine. The Mokelumne River Lodi itself, is its most greatest focus of old vines.

s breezes, Mokelumne within a very warm soils are a perfect habitat schenmann, Mohr-Fry of the region's premier and producers are an 'East Side' and In the east, the water deeper and drier, higher-toned, floral es are darker and es. Spencer finds a 'r' on the western 10 and 2011 were 2 and 2013. Old-vine Zinfandel, despite the heat, 're refreshing' s. 'No culture are more 'kay.' Those able grape and en ripped up and its future rnia. The AVA omma's annual wers are increasingly excited e and Spanish varieties. ranillo, Grenache, re, Carignan, Cinsault and in the ground in



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