

### DAILY DETAILS

Friday, April 18, 2014

#### Food + Drinks

## 5 Reasons Why Lodi, California Is The Next Napa Valley

Want great wine from California? Go east, young man.

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO

AT A RECENT blind tasting in New York—the kind where all the bottles are wrapped in numbered brown bags—I sat across from a pair of serious-looking winemakers from California, one of whom assured me I'd likely never tasted anything like the wines I was about to taste. He was correct. They were delicious, fruity, juicy wines—but funky, too. Not at all like the Chardonnays, Cabernets, and Pinots I'm used to from the Golden State. They stumped me, and I hate being stumped.

It turns out that not a single one of the dozen bottles possessed grapes most of us would be familiar with from California, and they were all grown in Lodi, a bountiful, if remote, region located about 90 minutes due east of San Francisco. I'm not kidding.

You might not have heard of Lodi wines made with grape varieties supplied grapes to the simple "California" label of planted vineyards. Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc—ones I tasted blind.

Although many families and seven generations, it's only been within the last 10 years that the current generation actually built wineries to convert their grapes into wine. Today, there are approximately 80 wineries and tasting rooms—an impressive number for sure—but there are more than 750 growers in the area. And many of those are now ready for their close-up. The results of the [2014 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition](#), held earlier this year, reported that wines with Lodi on the label took home a total of 201 medals—36 of them gold.

All of this probably sounds familiar to any student of California winemaking history, where an area starts out making bulk or cooperative winemaking, and then suddenly wakes up and says, Enough! Let's do it ourselves! Let's do it better! If you were to look at the evolution of California's most pedigreed appellations—like Napa, Sonoma or Santa Barbara—you'd see parallels with Lodi. And that's why I think it could be California's next Napa. **So here are five reasons why Lodi really is the next Napa:**



#### 1: This is Zin Central

For most of its winemaking history, Lodi was intrinsically linked to Zinfandel, from the days before we called grapes by varietal names. Many of the Zin vines still producing grapes today date back to the Civil War period, and look the part, too, which is why they're called gnarly vines. Stuart Spencer, winemaker at St. Amant Winery, sources Zinfandel from Mohr-Fry Ranches, whose Zin vines were planted between 1901 and the early '60s. I recently tasted a Predator 2012 Old Vine Zinfandel from Lodi that blew me away—and it was only 12 bucks!

#### 2: The Winemakers are Progressive

Lodi is at the forefront of experimenting with Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Rhône grape varieties, with over 60 varieties in commercial production. Markus Niggli, winemaker for Borra Vineyards, says, "Of course Lodi also offers the traditional varieties, but we are getting strong signals from the younger crowd to explore new wines." That's why, at that blind tasting, I had trouble identifying the wines. They included three Italian grapes (Barbera, Sangiovese and Primitivo); a Picpoul Blanc (native to France's Rhône Valley); a blend of Kerner, Riesling and Gewürztraminer (grown mostly in Germany); and a Pinotage (unique to South Africa).

#### 3: They are Way Ahead of the Organic Pack

Lodi leads California in sustainable farming practices and maintains the state's first third-party peer-reviewed sustainable winegrowing standards, called Lodi Rules. In 2012, 20,000 acres were "Certified Green" in the Lodi Appellation.

#### 4: The Weather is Perfect

Geographically Lodi sits directly east of the San Francisco Bay, and as daytime temperatures rise during the growing season, cool air is brought in across the delta creating a moderating effect on the climate. This creates relatively moderate daytime highs and cool evenings. "We generally don't see as large of a temperature swing as Napa and Sonoma," says Stuart Spencer. The resulting wines tend to have a very approachable forward fruit character and supple tannins.

#### 5: Amazing Prices

Lodi produces delicious wines at very affordable prices—especially given its proximity to Napa. The vast majority of wines bearing Lodi on the label are priced under \$25; many at nearly half that price.

# LOCA

THE WINES OF LODI, CA