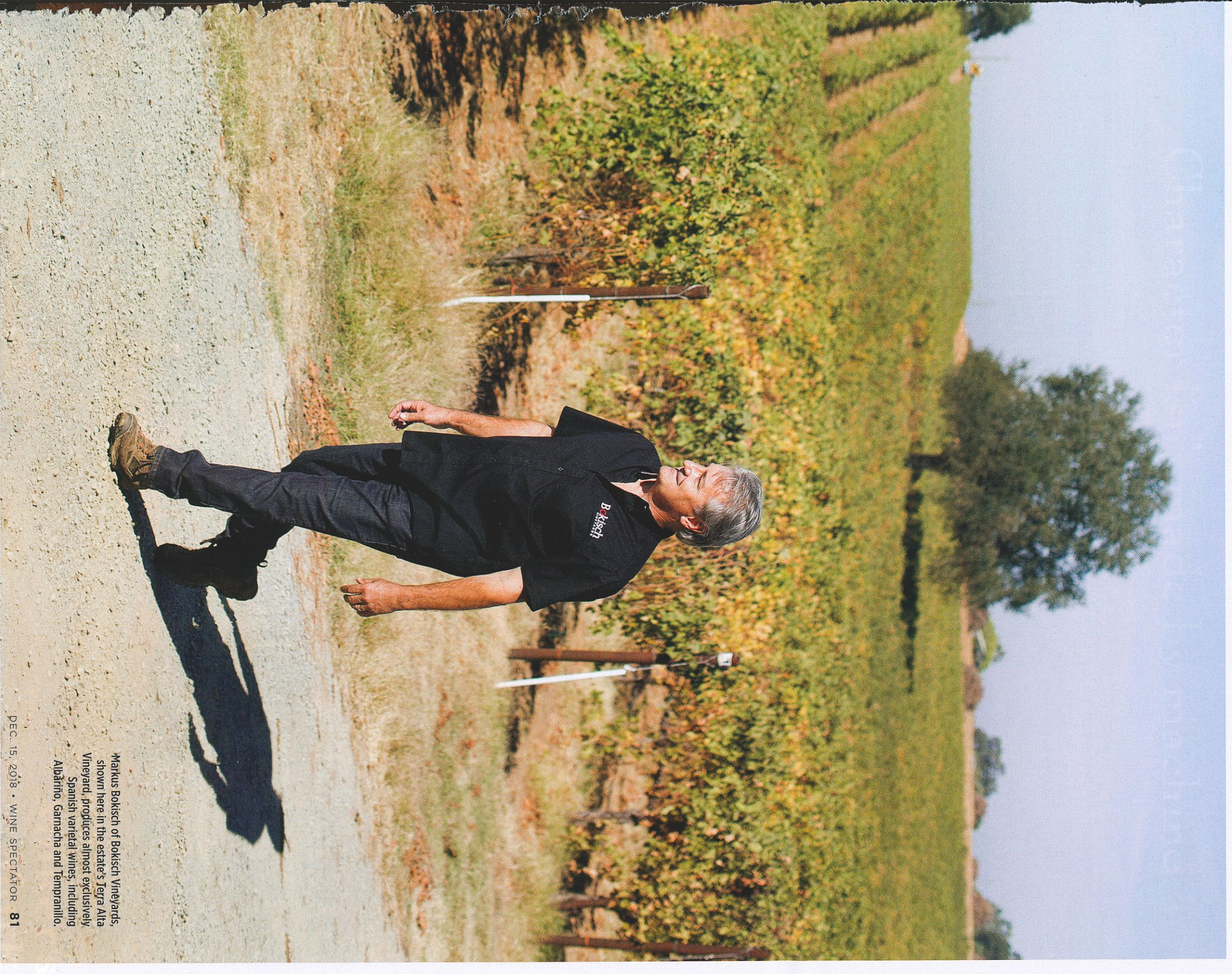


TOO I LOOKS AHEAD

California's grapegrowing dynamo is adding fine wine to its résumé

BY **AARON ROMANO** • PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MICHELLE DREWES**



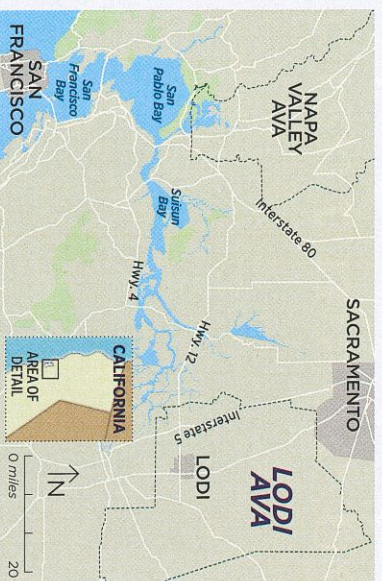
Markus Bokisch of Bokisch Vineyards, shown here in the estate's Jeyra Alta Vineyard, produces almost exclusively Spanish varietal wines, including Albariño, Garnacha and Tempranillo.

Markus Bokisch of Bokisch Vineyards drives along a county road on the outskirts of the city of Lodi in California's huge and fertile Central Valley. As the miles tick by, the scenery shifts from golden fields to grapevines as far as the eye can see. "This here is Trinchero, and that over there is Gallo," says Bokisch, mentioning toward the expansive vineyards belonging to the two wine giants.

Bokisch slows his vehicle in front of his own Vistra Luna Vineyard, at 139 acres just a dot on the Lodi appellation map. The contrast perfectly characterizes the region: smaller farms trucked amid behemoth wine companies.

Lodi is a good place to grow grapes—some might say too good. Located 35 miles south of the state capital of Sacramento, the Lodi region benefits from a warm Mediterranean climate and diverse soil types. Cooling breezes off the nearby Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta keep overnight temperatures in check. The area's 110,000 acres of vineyards and 800 grapegrowing families are a main engine of California's wine industry, with nearly 20 percent of all wine made in the state relying on the region's crop. Thirty of the top-selling wine companies in America have ties to vines in Lodi, and they continue to devour the majority of its tonnage each year, largely channeling the fruit into inexpensive, large-volume wines labeled as appellation California.

But especially in the past two decades, a growing number of

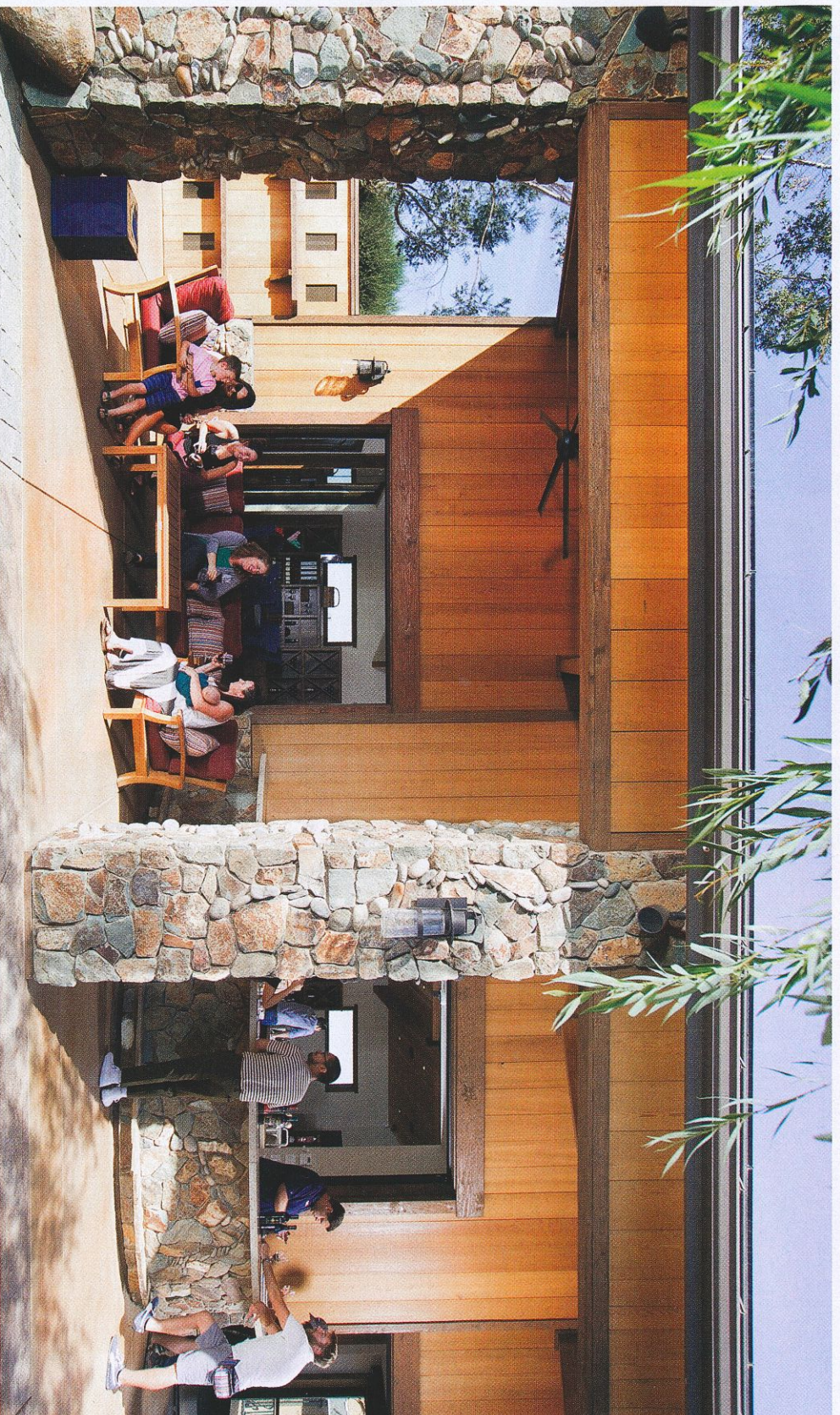


family farmers have started their own wineries, committed to transforming Lodi's workhorse reputation with fine, bespoke bottlings. It's a quiet movement that has been gaining momentum, and as a result, Lodi's identity is evolving.

Grapegrowing in Lodi goes back four or five generations for many families, and some can trace their history to the gold rush era. They packaged and shipped grapes to home winemakers during Prohibition, and when that ended in 1933, growers here organized into cooperatives, believing that working together offered greater market strength. But instead of nurturing the farming community, co-ops undermined the area's reputation, with many grapes used for Sherry styles and other fortified wine, as well as jug wine production. Also, until the 1980s, a table grape called Flame Tokay dominated vineyard acreage.

Thus, despite its prolific production and history, Lodi is in many ways still an emerging wine region. There were only a handful of bonded wineries when the AVA was established in 1986. Today, there are 85, but for decades, few wines carried Lodi on the label.

A key turning point came when Robert Mondavi returned to Lodi in the late 1970s. Mondavi had grown up here, and his family was among the many successful grape packers during Prohibition before Robert's father, Cesare, moved the family to Napa Valley in the 1940s. Robert returned to found Woodbridge Winery in 1979, which later became an archetypal Lodi brand. Woodbridge made affordable



Michael David Winery's Seven Deadly Zins bottling, launched with the 2000 vintage, became the first nationally distributed wine to bear the Lodi appellation on its label. Today, the current-release 2015 boasts an impressive 300,000 case production. Above: The winery's tasting room, café and garden are open daily.



The Mission Revival-style Lodi Arch was designed in 1907 by E.B. Brown as a symbol of the town's agricultural and economic growth. Today, it's a California state historic landmark.

white and red cork-finished table wines, which helped steer Lodi vintners away from jug wine and selling grapes to co-ops.

By the mid-1980s, Mondavi and a team of local vintners were introducing new winemaking and viticulture techniques, conducting trials with new trellis systems, varieties, clones and rootstocks. They helped spread best practices for increasing wine quality and encouraged growers to make their own wines.

"It's taken this next generation to turn what were once commodity wines into an art form," says David Phillips, co-owner, with his brother Michael, of Michael David Winery. Long before the brand's Seven Deadly Zins was on the shelf of wine retailers across the U.S., the Phillipses were watermelon farmers. From the time of its arrival in Lodi in 1865, the family sold a variety of fruits and vegetables at roadside stands, in addition to farming wine grapes.

In 1984, they decided to make the change from 99 percent produce to 99 percent grapes. "The sales of our pumpkins bought our first tanks," jokes Phillips.

In 2000, the Phillipses ended up with a larger crop than they'd anticipated and opted to blend their seven Zinfandel vineyard sources to create the Seven Deadly Zins bottling. Within just a few years, it became what was most likely the first nationally distributed wine with Lodi on the label. The most recent version, from the 2015 vintage (89 points, \$16) offers blackberry flavors accented by rhubarb and spice notes, with an impressive 300,000 cases made.

Despite the success of Seven Deadly Zins, there remain only a handful of nationally distributed Lodi wines. Phillips has encouraged his neighbors to pursue building their own wineries, put Lodi on their labels and get their wines into the marketplace.

"What was missing even 20 years ago," Bokisch says, "was the multitude of wineries that now exist." Today's growers can sample

RECENT RELEASES FROM LODI

The Lodi AVA is broken into seven subappellations, which range from the fine sandy soils along the banks of the Mokelumne River surrounding the city of Lodi to gravel- and cobblestone-faced volcanic soils in the rolling hills at the eastern edge of the appellation.

SCORE	WINE	PRICE	CASES
90	KLINKER BRICK Zinfandel Lodi Old Ghost Old Vine 2015	\$37	5,000
90	RAVENSWOOD Zinfandel Lodi Old Vine 2017	\$14	32,500
90	CAROL SHELTON Zinfandel Lodi Pizazz Zin Piazza Ranch Old Vine 2015	\$19	480
89	BOKISCH Albariño Clements Hills Terra Alta Vineyard 2017	\$20	227
89	COVENANT Roussanne Lodi Mensch 2017	\$20	250
89	HARNEY LANE Zinfandel Lodi 2014	\$24	650
89	KLINKER BRICK Syrah Lodi Farrah 2015	\$20	7,000
89	LANGETWINS Sauvignon Blanc Lodi Musque Clone 2017	\$15	2,000
89	MICHAEL DAVID Zinfandel Lodi The Seven Deadly Zins Old Vine 2015	\$16	300,000
89	OAK FARM Sauvignon Blanc Lodi 2017	\$19	1,715
88	BOKISCH Garnacha Clements Hills Terra Alta Vineyard 2015	\$23	490
88	BOKISCH Verdejo Borden Ranch Clay Station Vineyard 2017	\$20	112
88	CLINE Zinfandel Lodi Old Vine 2016	\$11	60,000
88	MICHAEL DAVID Petite Petit Lodi 2016	\$18	125,000
88	OAK FARM Cabernet Sauvignon Lodi 2016	\$25	4,172
88	PLUNGERHEAD Petite Strah Lodi 2016	\$14	10,632
88	VAN RUITEN Davis Road Red Lodi 2016	\$14	2,604



McCay Cellars' Linda and Michael McCay (behind counter)

what their distinctive grapes taste like as varietal wines, rather than merely as components of multivarietal blends. "We can now begin to understand the flavor profile of different sites within the seven sub-AVAs of Lodi, and there is still a load of opportunity as more vineyard sites convert from production contracts," says Bokisch.

While many vintners, like Phillips, have hung their hat on old-vine Zinfandel, Cabernet is the leading variety planted. Many see the potential to craft high quality Cabernet for \$18 to \$25 a bottle, such as Oak Farm Cabernet Sauvignon Lodi 2016 (88, \$25), a supple red with minerally currant, cherry and raspberry flavors.

Bokisch has opted for diversity, pursuing his passion for Spanish varieties such as Albariño, Tempranillo and Verdejo. Bokisch's Albariño Clements Hills Terra Alta Vineyard 2017 (89, \$20) is a lively and refreshing white with good intensity to a lip-smacking core of lemon meringue, pear and green apple notes.

There are also hidden gems such as old-vine Carignan and Cinsault that are now being tapped by innovative and ambitious winemakers. One of these is Ryan Sherman of Fields Family Wines, who sources the 130-year-old Bechtold Vineyard to produce an elegant 100-percent whole-cluster Cinsault. All told, Lodi has 120 different varieties of grapes growing in its vineyards.

Winemakers from outside of Lodi are taking notice as well. Tegan Passalacqua, director of winemaking for Turley Wine Cellars in Napa, purchased a 20-acre old-vine Zinfandel vineyard in Lodi and has plans to open operations for his Sandlands label. Morgan Twain-Peterson of Bedrock Wine Co. in Sonoma purchased a vineyard just across the street from Passalacqua's. Sonoma-based wineries Carlisle, Carol Shelton and Cline purchase grapes from the region as well.

It has taken a dogged grassroots effort to chart a new course for

Lodi away from commodity production, and to spur investment in higher quality wines. Vintners feel like they're just now scratching the surface. But the sense of community and camaraderie is high, and Lodi's tide appears to be rising.

TOURING LODI

Located 45 minutes' drive south of Sacramento, or two hours northeast of San Francisco, Lodi is at heart a farming town.

Long, flat, straight roads take you past large swaths of vineyard, but also by fruit and nut orchards and grazing livestock. You're likely to come up behind a tractor, but the uncongested roads allow for an easy pass. Many of the wineries here are modest and unassuming, housed in a barn or storage warehouse, while others are as stylish as their counterparts in Napa and Sonoma. There are 70 wineries that offer tastings, including 10 downtown tasting rooms, and tasting fees are reasonable.

The Lodi Arch, also known as the Mission Arch, with its gilded bear and bells, provides a grand entrance to the revitalized downtown, which exudes wine country charm, its tree-lined streets dotted with boutiques, wineshops and restaurants. Even five years ago, downtown was still sleepy, but there's traction now, and Lodi is evolving into a food and wine destination. Profiled below are some of the best places to dine and taste wine in Lodi. Accommodations are limited. The choice lodging is the Wine & Roses, a 66-room hotel and spa that includes the Towne House Restaurant, headed by chef Bradley Ogden. But Lodi is a doable day trip from the Bay Area or Sacramento if an overnight stay is not in your plans.



Oak Farm Vineyards

McCay produces, which range from Chenin Blanc and Viognier to old-vine Cinsault, Carignan and Zinfandel. McCay describes his style as anti-big, showcasing crisp whites and elegantly styled, lower-alcohol reds.

Michael David Winery

4580 W. Highway 12 **Telephone** (209) 368-7384 **Website** michaeldavidwinery.com **Open Daily, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Cost** Tastings \$10–\$25

From the road, Michael David Winery looks like an unassuming roadside café. But hiding behind that facade is a sprawling alfresco tasting space. A pond with multiple water features is the centerpiece, with flower gardens, chicken coops and bocce courts. There's even a fenced-in miniature town and play structure for kids. You can make a reservation for a seated outdoor tasting, or belly up to the semicircular stone bar inside the tasting room with its vaulted wood ceilings. Here, you can taste five of the label's flagship or reserve wines (predominantly robust reds).

With a café on-site, Michael David is an ideal midday stop to fuel up before continuing your Lodi tour. The menu offers a variety of sandwiches, burgers, soups and salads, with meat sourced from local 4-H programs and produce grown on the Phillippes' farm. Assorted vegetables are also available for sale, as are tasty homemade pies.

Oak Farm Vineyards

23627 Dewries Road **Telephone** (209) 365-6565 **Website** oakfarmvineyards.com **Open Daily, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Cost** Tastings \$10–\$30

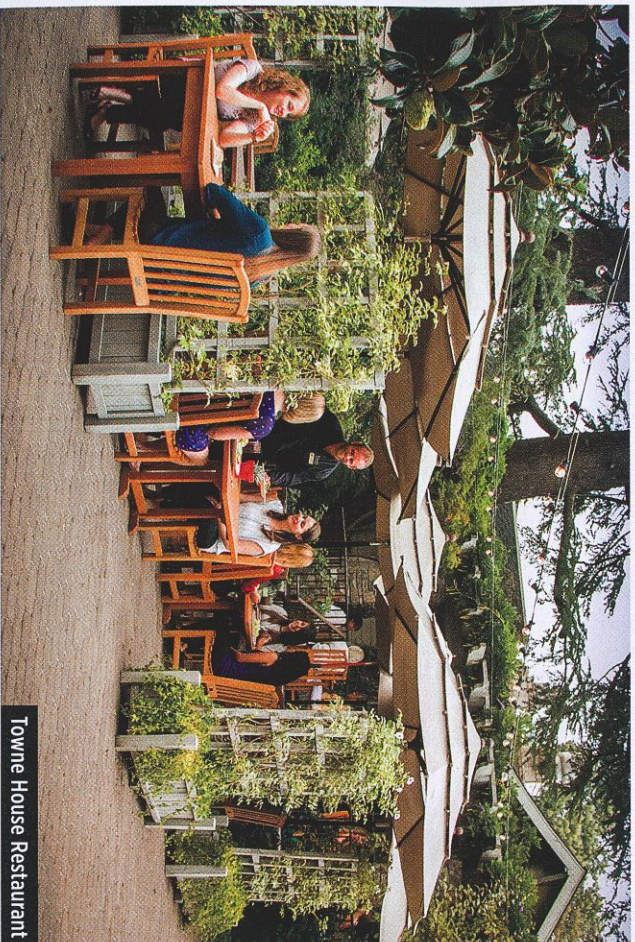
Oak Farm Vineyards' tranquil, pastoral property lies at the end of a dusty dirt road. This ranch was once home to William DeVries, a wheat and cattle farmer during the late 1800s, and features a beautiful colonial mansion at its center, with countless oak trees surrounding it. Today, the Panella family, walnut and cherry farmers turned vintners, has transformed the estate to include a winery and 70 acres, 58 of which are under vine. A modern, barnlike winery blends the indoor and outdoor seamlessly, with large windows and doors, offering guests views of the estate's splendor. The tasting room features a large rectangular bar where guests can sample a variety of wines. The patio offers ample dining space and lounge furniture from which to enjoy reserve pours paired with cheese and charcuterie.

Towne House Restaurant at Wine & Roses

2505 W. Turner Road **Telephone** (209) 371-6160 **Website** winerose.com **Open Breakfast and lunch, Monday to Friday; brunch, Saturdays and Sunday; dinner, daily Cost Moderate**

Lodi's best hotel, restaurant and spa are all conveniently located at the same spot, tucked into a shaded sanctuary just outside the downtown area. The grounds date to 1902, and the original cottage is now home to the Towne House Restaurant. There's a warm and welcoming dining room, with wood floors and tan, brown and white accents, as well as outdoor seating along the porch and paved patio below. Noted chef Bradley Ogden is the restaurant's culinary director, and the menu focuses on regional, seasonal ingredients, many of which are sourced from local farms as well as from an estate garden. The dishes are simple yet imaginative, such as Spanish octopus with blistered shishito peppers, roasted eggplant, toasted sunflower seeds and bagna cauda. The wine list proudly represents Lodi with 70 different offerings and includes a smattering of other California and European selections.

Should you need a place to stay, Wine & Roses hotel offers 66 modern and elegant rooms and suites. There's also a spa to fulfill your vacation pampering needs. □



Towne House Restaurant

Bokisch Vineyards

18921 Atkins Road **Telephone** (209) 642-8880 **Website** bokischvineyards.com **Open Friday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Cost** Tastings \$10

You'll find Bokisch Vineyards where the valley floor starts to transition to rolling hills. It's part of the sub-AVA of Clements Hills, which owner Markus Bokisch calls the "toes" of the Sierra Foothills. The tasting room is small and filled with memorabilia of Bokisch's Spanish heritage, including photos of his rice-farming family from near Priorat, and primitive-looking grain-threshing boards. You can also taste outside while relaxing on lounge chairs positioned to provide sweeping views of the Terra Alta estate vineyard. Bokisch produces almost exclusively Spanish varietal wines, save for a few Zinfandels from vineyards he farms.

McCay Cellars

100 S. Sacramento St. **Telephone** (209) 368-9463 **Website** mccaycellars.com **Open Daily, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Cost** Tastings \$10

McCay Cellars owner and winemaker Michael McCay wanted to create a space where guests could sit down and relax. He transformed an abandoned building in downtown Lodi into a hip, urban wine oasis. The decor is repurposed everything. The walls are a patchwork of corrugated tin, and the front of the tasting bar is made of old doors that have been cut in half. A gondola flatbed trailer has a new life as a couch in a lounge area, and vintage lampshades hang from the ceiling, as does a 103-year-old vine with a single taproot, the showpiece of the space. There's also a shaded patio for open-air tasting. The vibe is as eclectic and unique as the wines