

THE COAST NEWS GROUP

THE COAST NEWS | THE RANCHO SANTA FE NEWS | THE INLAND EDITION

Hit the Road: The Lowdown on Lodi

By: E'louise Ondash

September 20, 2017



Dan Arbuckle, Lodi native and boat concession operator, regularly enjoys kayaking on serene Lodi Lake. Fed by the Mokelumne River, the lake was created by the Civic Conservation Corps during the Depression to supply drinking water to the town of Lodi. Photo by Robert Calzada

Dan Arbuckle stretches to reach the wild grapes, blackberries and elderberries attached to the tangle of vines just above his head. He succeeds in plucking all three fruits and offers them in his outstretched hand. They are sweet and juicy — even the elderberries.

Berry-picking on an early September morning may not be all that unusual, but the thing is, we are sitting in kayaks. On a river. In Lodi.



Lodi sign artist, business owner and expert gold-leafer Tony Segale tells visitors about this mural, one of 11 in downtown. Each tells a portion of the town's history. This one, by Segale, is an homage to Lodi's first dry goods store. Photo by E'Louise Ondash

Yes, that Lodi.

Surprised?

Arbuckle isn't — at least not anymore.

A native of Lodi, owner of Headwaters Kayak Shop and operator of Lodi Lake's boat concession, Arbuckle thought he'd never look back after leaving in 2004 for college. But he had promised "a girl" (now his wife) that he'd follow her anywhere, and she ended up in Lodi. He wasn't thrilled, he confesses, but "that's when I discovered kayaking again, and the Mokelumne River quickly became my outdoor sanctuary and gave me a new appreciation for the area. It allowed me to see things with fresh eyes."

Which is what those who know and love Lodi want visitors to do.

The area is still highly agricultural, but the grape-growing sector has evolved from one that exported its crop to Napa and Sonoma to one that keeps its produce and creates its own wines.

The Lodi appellation, earned in 1986, now claims more than 85 wineries that produce more than 450 labels. (More on this in the next column.)

And for those who would rather (or also) embrace the outdoors, there are plenty of options in and around Lodi.

At Lodi Lake and the Mokelumne River, you'll find birds and birders, rafters, tubers, fishing enthusiasts, paddle boarders and kayakers.

Speaking of which, back on the water, we navigate upstream on the serene Mokelumne, gliding through some its 26 hairpin turns that eventually will end in the

Eastern Sierras. One minute our route takes us past what appears to be wilderness; around the next corner we come upon multi-million-dollar mansions with expansive lawns, manicured gardens and fountains. Local mallards and other species of ducks seem pretty tolerant of our presence, only quacking loudly when there seems to be an internal dispute.



A cool and quiet retreat can be found within Lodi's Micke Grove Regional Park. Its 132 acres includes a zoo, the county's historical museum and the beautifully landscaped Micke Grove Japanese Garden, where this bridge can be found.

For those who prefer solid ground, VisitLodi has an excellently detailed guide to the area's extensive bike trails and routes of various lengths. Choose from itineraries that include country roads, vineyards and wineries, cafes, historic downtown, and wildlife territory. You can even cycle to Sacramento and hop the 5:10 p.m. Amtrak back to downtown Lodi.

For a sense of where Lodi has been and where it's going, ask David Stuart, a fourth-generation San Joaquin County resident and CEO/director of the San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum. Located in leafy Micke Grove Regional Park, the museum includes eight exhibition and four historic buildings.

At the entry of the museum, we stand on a hugely enlarged satellite photo of the area, which delineates farms and fields, rivers, creeks and roads and illustrates the city's close relationship with the 1,100 square miles of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Murals on side walls give the illusion of surveying California's Central Valley (snow-capped Sierras to the east), and around the corner, plenty of artifacts representative of the Miwok and Yokut Indians and early European settlers.

"I like that we've added or upgraded exterior exhibits to put that early history into the context of the natural habitats in the region and ... tell how important the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta has been in shaping our history," explains Stuart.

(Not to miss: the fascinating video that explains where all that pizza sauce comes from.)

Not in sight are important documents like the diaries of two sisters who traveled in 1859 via wagon to San Joaquin County.

“The diaries didn’t give us a lot of information on the wagon (restored and on display),” Stuart says, “but they did tell the whole story of the five-month trip. That gave us all the examples we needed to develop the exhibition on the American settlers (who came to) San Joaquin County.”

The afternoon culminates with a less-cerebral but still historic destination — the A&W Root Beer shop in downtown Lodi. Franchise owner Peter Knight reminisces via Skype about his days as a teen employee there and his collection of A&W paraphernalia, displayed in the shop’s glass cases. The root beer floats before us are the perfect ending to a day of discovering — or re-discovering — Lodi.

For a free visitor guide: www.VisitLodi.com.

E’Louise Ondash is a freelance writer living in North County. Tell her about your travels at eondash@coastnewsgroup.com