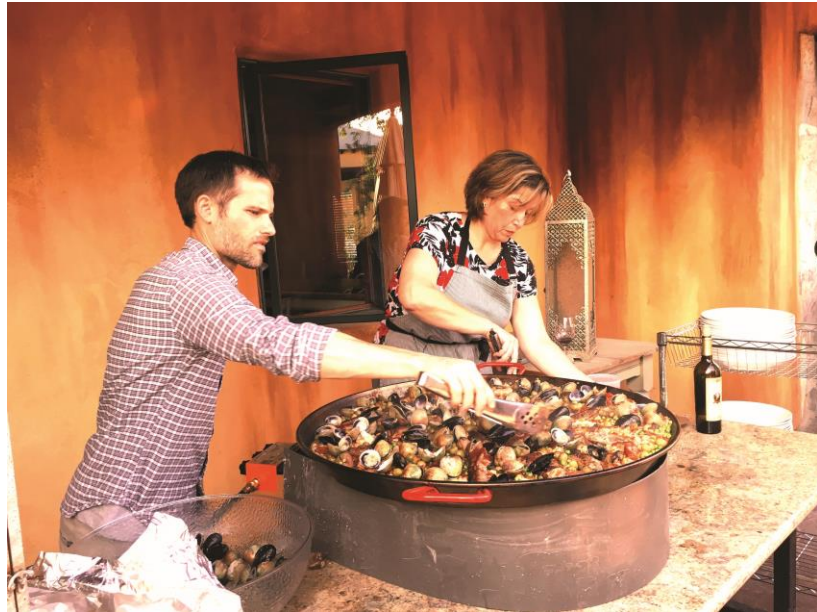


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Hit the Road: In Lodi, every winemaker has a story to tell

By: E'louise Ondash



A gigantic pan of paella is prepared for an outdoor dinner party at St. Jorge Winery in Lodi, which harvests grapes from one of the oldest vineyards (108 years old) in the area. Owner Vern Vierra grew up making wine with his father and grandfather, then opened St. Jorge in 2009. Photo by E' Louise Ondash

In Lodi Wine Country, every winemaker has a story, and it's worth listening. You might even say that it adds a dimension to the wine that might not be available up north in — um — you know, Napa or Sonoma.

Take the tale of Allen Lombardi and Thomas Michael Stokes.



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Recently picked Barbera grapes at Oak Farm Vineyards in Lodi await the next steps on the way to becoming wine. The fruit will be sorted, de-stemmed, then transferred to a tank where they'll ferment. Nearly 47,000 pounds of grapes were harvested on this day; each bin holds 1,000 pounds. Photo by Dan Panella

They met on the internet and it was a match made in heaven. Their relationship began in 1999 when Lombardi was making wine in his New Jersey home and searching for “good grapes.” The internet turned up Stokes, who had been growing the fruit for years in Lodi.

“Mike sent me grapes and eventually I started marketing and promoting grapes for home winemakers and commercial wineries all over the country,” said Lombardi, a former telecomm employee.

The two began buying acreage, and five years ago, bought an abandoned winery. Today they are Thomas Allen Selections and this year’s harvest is their 17th. Lombardi, who has commuted from New Jersey to Lodi since 2000, will move his family to this Central Valley town of 65,000 next June.

Both owners have children involved in the business, which makes proprietary blends for volume clients and a \$5.99 cabernet (Thomas Allen label) for Trader Joe’s.

Thomas Allen is just one of Lodi’s diverse wineries and they want to get the word out: Come up and discover the 85 wineries, 70 tasting rooms, historic downtown, the sustainable farm-to-table restaurants, destination resorts like the graciously rustic Wine & Roses, a scenic lake, a gentle river and all the outdoor fun that goes with them.

“People ask us to define Lodi and we say that it’s like Napa was in the 1960s,” Lombardi explained. Translation: Family-owned farms and vineyards that produce relatively small lots of produce and wine; a laid-back atmosphere; minimal traffic; and accessible winemakers who just might be the person behind the tasting-room counter.

And did I mention minimal traffic? If you’ve visited Napa/Sonoma on a weekend, you’ll appreciate this factor.

Low-profile Lodi has actually been cultivating vineyards since the mid-19th century, but growers mostly shipped their grapes to points north. Oddly, Prohibition was a boon for Lodi. The Volstead Act allowed for home winemaking and Lodi’s industry thrived by shipping grapes nationwide. When Prohibition ended in 1933, Lodi farmers began making their own wine and tasting rooms soon followed.



Winemaker Jeremy Trettavik, whose tasting room is in a beautifully restored early-1900s building near the Lodi Arch, offers visitors a chance to sample some Grenache-in-progress. Trettavik estimates he worked 40,000 hours in various aspects of the wine industry before becoming a winemaker – a fact that is cleverly included on his wine labels. Photo by E'Louise Ondash

For its unique soil and grape-perfect climate, Lodi earned its American Viticultural Area (AVA) designation in 1986, which today offers about 450 labels. This is Lodi Wine Country by the numbers:

- 110,000 — number of acres of premium winegrapes
- 750-plus — number of growers
- 100-plus — number of varieties
- 671,000 — tons of grapes produced in 2015
- \$413 million — value of annual grape production
- 18 — percentage of California's total wine grape production.

And it must be noted that in 2015, Lodi beat out Marlborough, New Zealand; Sicily, Italy; Walla Walla, Wash.; and Russian River Valley, Calif., for WineEnthusiast magazine's Wine Region of the Year award.

On a recent hot September afternoon in historic downtown Lodi, Jeremy Trettavik offered visitors a taste from a jug holding some sweet smelling, guava-colored juice.

“This will eventually become a Grenache,” explained Trettavik, owner of Jeremy Wine Co.

I was the only taker and I loved it.

Why not sell this juice-with-a-kick just as it is?

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Trettavik smiles broadly and suggests that drinking this highly immature Grenache may play havoc with the GI tract.

Along with its reputation for good wine, Lodi's culinary scene also is expanding. Many restaurants dot the historic downtown and nearby countryside. One-star Michelin Chef Bradley Ogden directs the show at the Towne House Restaurant at Wine & Roses, a boutique hotel and spa just west of Lodi Lake. Its wine collection includes 70 Lodi labels and he keeps the food local.

"I try to source food within a 100-mile radius," he said.

For a free visitor's guide to Lodi, visit www.visitlodi.com.

For more commentary and additional photos of Lodi, wineries and the Central Valley countryside, visit www.facebook.com/elouiseondash.

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