

Exploring Zinfandel: Lodi Discovering the secret of Lodi's great Zins.

June 3, 2014 By [Gregory Dal Piaz](#)



Last week I began my summer time look at Zinfandel by focusing on Mendocino and lake counties, two regions that have limited presence in the Zin lovers mind. Today I'm taking a different tact and focusing instead on lodi, a veritable Zin lovers paradise.

Why you ask?

Well simply put it's a region that not only has a great climate for Zinfandel, with warm days and cool nights, not to mention lots of drying breezes, but it's also not been a secret that Lodi is a great place to grow grapes, and in particular Zinfandel grapes. That means plenty of old vine vineyards. Like tons of them. Like stand in some places and that's all you'll see. It's one of the secrets to Lodi's incredible successes with Zinfandel.

The other secrets aren't really secrets. The weather, hot as I mentioned with the cooling Delta breezes flowing in like clockwork every evening. All that helps to preserve the acidity and freshness in grapes that have been basking in the sun all day. Lodi is also easy to farm. they probably don't want me to mention that, visions of mechanical harvests in their minds, but that's not really an issue. First of all because mechanical harvesting is not the boogeyman some would us believe it is. Sure I'd prefer conscientious manual harvesting, but the truth is mechanical harvesting gets more fruit in, more quickly, and often overnight while it is remains cool that is typically the case with manual harvesting. And it gets the fruit into the winery quicker as well, reducing the time it has to oxidize before fermenting or sitting for a cold soak.

But you know what? That really doesn't matter much with the wines I'm talking about because the wines I'm talking about are mostly from gnarly old head pruned vines. You're not going to get a mechanical harvester through those vines. gentle hands and a good eye are in high demand when the fruit from these vines needs to be brought in. And what stunning fruit it can be. Hundred year old vines have something special about them. Their deep roots and naturally low yields seem to be able to endure to vagaries of the growing season much more smoothly than younger vines. They tend to produce more balanced wines as well, often a bit lower in fruit and alcohol but with more nuance and detail on the palate.

Not all Lodi Zinfandel is lime this of course, not even all old vine Zin from lodi, because Lodi does in fact have terroir. We like to think that terror is reserved from old slopes and craggy vineyards but even here in Lodi terroir is on grand display. Consider if you will the style difference that one finds in Eastside Lodi versus Westside Lodi wines. The east side has a lower water table, and sits further from the Delta breezes. Berry size tends to be smaller and the concentration of fruit in those berries particularly intense.

The Westside on the other hand produces bigger, plumper berries, and wines that tend to be spicier and with dark fruit coming from the richer, loamy soils that slowly replace some of the sandier soils as one moves from east to west through the appellation. It's in those sandy soils can upset the apple cart of the Lodi wine hierarchy. Arguably the stars of the vineyards in Lodi, as far as I know, are the old vine Carignane in the Bechtold vineyard, and the own rooted, old vine Zinfandel in the Kirschenmann vineyard. Since today we're talking about Zin, today we're talking about Kirschenmann.

Now owned by Teagan Passalacqua, best known as Turley's winemaker, Kirschenmann is not only a source of stunning, elegant, red fruited Zinfandel, but it's also a bit of a rule breaker, laying as it does on the east side of Lodi. The wines here should be big and dense, and many are, but here we have a vineyard that produces silken textured wines. It not only breaks the rules for Lodi's east-west identity, but it crushes the preconceptions we might have as to what a Lodi Zin should be like.

That is the beauty of Lodi. There are the classic big, powerful Zins still produced here, but they vary from east to west. And then there are producers skillfully teasing out a more elegant expression of Zin from old vine vineyards. And finally, there are those fortunate enough to be working with what are some of the vinous jewels of California's vinous heritage. I've said it before, but it warrants saying again. Zinfandel is California's greatest grape variety. It produces wines with real terroir, even as the warmth of California cooks out the terroir of so many other varieties. It's a fantastic lens through which to view the variety of Lodi's vineyards and if you're into Zin, you really do have to take a look at what's happening here. Prices remain fair, vineyards are stunningly well maintained, and the region as a whole is waking up and realizing what glorious raw materials they have to work with.

Top Lodi Zinfandel Tasted 4/14

1. [Turley Kirschenmann Vineyard Zinfandel \(2012\)](#) List It
2. [Carlisle Zinfandel Kirschenmann Vineyard \(2012\)](#) List It
3. [Harney Lane Zinfandel Lodi Old Vine Lizzy James Vineyard \(2011\)](#) List It
4. [Mettler Epicenter Zinfandel \(2011\)](#) List It
5. [Jeremy Wine Co Old Vine Zinfandel \(2012\)](#) List It
6. [St. Amant Zinfandel Marian's Vineyard \(2012\)](#) List It
7. [St. Amant Winery Zinfandel Lodi Old Vines Mohr-Fry Ranch Vineyard \(2012\)](#) List It
8. [Harney Lane Zinfandel Lodi \(2011\)](#) List It
9. [Fields Family Wines Lodi Old Vine Zinfandel \(2011\)](#) List It

Case in point is the Lodi native project. A group of winemakers got together and decided to produce a set of Zins that adhere to some very strict rules:

- 100% Zinfandel bottlings from a single contiguous vineyard (exception: old vine plantings with long established field mixes) located within the Lodi AVA.
- Preference for established “old vine” plantings (i.e. pre-1962), with exceptions made for distinctive younger plantings.
- Native yeast (non-inoculated) fermentations only.
- No use of oak chips, dust or similar amendments.
- No acidification or de-acidification.
- No new oak or use of innerstaves in aging process.
- No water addition or de-alcoholizing measures.
- No tannin additions.
- No inoculation for malolactic fermentation.
- No use of Mega-Purple or other concentrate products.
- No filtering or fining.
- No must concentration, Flash Détente or similar extraction measures
- Proposed cuvées are to be submitted by each producer for sensory evaluation and subsequent approval of entire group.
- Preference for vineyards certified by Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing and/or CCOF.

With so little to play with these winemakers, currently including St. Amant, Macchia, m2, Fields family, McCay, and Maley Brothers wineries are putting wines on the table that any wine snob would love to snub, but can't. These are real wines, natural wines, wines of their place. I loved them and kick off my review of Lodi Zins today with notes on these six wines. This is the direction Lodi is heading in. You'll always be able to find the classic, rich, powerful style of Zin produced here but if you think for a moment you'll realize that wines made following the Lodi native protocol where in fact the first wines made from vineyards such as Bechtold, Kirschenmann, Mohr-Fry and all the other vineyards that predate the modern style of winemaking that has dominated the scene for just the past few decades.

Lodi. it's full of surprises and a region with one foot firmly in the past, and one stepping briskly to the future. Discover the wines today, they aren't going to remain the Zin connoisseur's secret for much longer.

Lodi Native

This set of wines has been available for sale in the [Lodi Wine Visitor's Center](#).

To find out more about the Lodi Native project visit [Lodi Native](#).

[2012 M2 Lodi Native Zinfandel Soucie Vineyard 14.5%](#)

1916 self rooted, head trained, underground drip

750 lbs Picked at 22 brix for acid

1500 lbs later at higher sugar levels

Musky and wild on the nose and deeply aromatic with sweet caramel undertones. In the mouth this is bright and juicy with red fruit on entry, fine tannins, and good clarity on the palate which is very fresh and a little red currant toned and subtly earthy. Finishing with clarity and purity to the lovely fresh Zin berry fruit, this is delicious. 90pt

[2012 McCay Lodi Native Zinfandel Trulux Vineyard 14.6%](#)

Mineral on the nose with smoky undertones to the lightly floral, green edged fruit that is framed with lovely earthy, cheese rind accents. Spicy and bright and slightly medicinal in the mouth, with a little green herb antiseptic accent on the rather high toned palate. This is rich with clear fruit on the palate, red cherry fruit that shows gorgeous clarity with briary accents, nice length, superb freshness and wonderfully drinkability. The red fruit gains a hint of Xmas spice on the finish, just clear and dry with good acid integration, though the flavors get a little jammy on the finish which shows a hint of astringent bitterness, which a find to be a pleasing counterpoint to the fruit. 92pts

[2012 St. Amant Lodi Native Zinfandel Marian's Vineyard 14.5%](#)

High toned on the nose with a pine resin top note, along with talc and fresh bay leaf notes accenting the core of red fruit. Broad on the palate, and slightly edgy with slightly angular tannins and lovely acid that gives this lift to the raspberry, mineral, earth and dried green herb flavors. The palate, tense with good energy, has a very fine texture and good energy that drives the slightly earthy, tree bark tinged fruit through the finish. 91pts

[2012 Fields Family Lodi Native Zinfandel Century Block Vineyard 14%](#)

1905 own rooted, a few Tokay and Grenache vines
23 24 brix all destemmed

Tight, vinous, and a little animal on the nose with white peppery spice on the nose that sits low on the complex and nuanced nose which shows hints of leather and dark berry fruit. This is notably fresh on entry, hinting of blueberries up front followed by gorgeous, big, spicy raspberry flavors and small fine grained tannins. Finishing a bit short but with cut, fine energy and a little sneaky length to the licorice and slightly medicinal finale. This is all old viney, vinous, and deep on the palate, with great palate weight. A rich, powerful yet light on its feet Zin that shows amazing clarity. 93pts

[2012 Macchia Lodi Native Zinfandel Noma Vineyard 15.8%](#)

Dry farmed on the east side

Inky, powerful, and dark on a nose filled with black fruit, spicy, black pepper, and a whisper of herb. As bright and juicy as this may be it is undoubtedly the most powerful wine of the lineup. Filled with spicy dark, dried berry fruit, this offers an avalanche of spice on the long finish which is packed with candied blackberry fruit, and while it remains clear and fresh on the palate, this is more typical Lodi Zin. Fabulous, but less elegant than the rest of the line-up. 92pts

Recent tasting note on Lodi Zinfandel

[2012 Turley Zinfandel Kirschenmann Vineyard \\$50](#)

Fruity on the nose with lovely black berry aromas framed with nuanced cinnamon, allspice, sage, and earth aromas. Open, broad, and expansive in the mouth this shows a gorgeous texture with both power and delicacy in the mouth. The flavors show a bit of herbal edge to the blackberry fruit, as this turns firm and long on the finish. A fairly spicy Zin, this is very complete both texturally and the flavor profile with rich cherry, blackberry fruit on the finish and real purity and drive right through the finish which shows fine firm tannins and real cut. 94pts

[2012 Carlisle Zinfandel Kirschenmann Vineyard \\$34](#)

Produced from two tons of fruit

Sweet spices on the nose which shows sweet sliced plum accents, dusty mineral notes, and a smoky, briary top note. This explodes in the mouth on entry with gorgeous clarity and lift to the rich if slightly jammy strawberry and red raspberry fruit. Turning almost delicate on the midpalate with its pinpoint structure and crisp fruit, this is just delightful. The dusty and moderately tannic finish adds a fine bit of tension to the lingering strawberry, currant and rhubarb flavors. Just a great bottle of Zin. 93pts

[2011 Harney Lane Zinfandel Lizzy James \\$35](#)

Deep, oak framed slightly musky aromas of blackberry, black raspberry and boysenberry greets the nose with hints of hickory nuts and pipe briar along with a nuance of peppercorn adding detail. Bright acids on entry, rather transparent in the mouth with lots of cranberry accented cherry fruit, that turns more toward the blackberry spectrum with vanilla arriving on the midpalate turning a bit peppery on the backend before returning to blackberry fruit on the palate. Complexity with lovely transparency and depth. 91pts

[2011 Mettler Epicenter Zinfandel \\$18](#)

Big crushed berry nose, all boysenberry toned with smoky top notes. A hint of creaminess greets the palate followed by some fine sandalwood and spice notes, then a touch of nutty oak in a big plush style that fills the mouth with pure rich crushed blackberry fruit with hints of juniper and smoked meats on the long, powerful finish. Palate staining, and a powerhouse, Classic Lodi Zin. 90pts

[2012 Jeremy Wine Co Old Vine Zinfandel \\$20](#)

Nice zin berry fruit greets the nose gaining spicy nuance and showing some nicely integrated oak. This is supple with big fruit, soft tannins, and integrated acids in the mouth. The palate is full of blueberry framed blackberry fruit that shows a bit of integrated wood on the backend, and then notes of mineral, pomegranate seeds and wild black cherry fruit on the fairly long finish. Nicely done in a big, seamless style. 90pts

[2012 St. Amant Zinfandel Marian's Vineyard \\$20](#)

Briary, smoky oak, and complex on the nose with almost a men's cologne dried floral note layered over subtle fruit aromas. Light on entry, and almost a bit meaty with a hint of woody sweetness early on the palate followed by round, smooth, fresh cherry and raspberry fruit that shows a slightly candied edge.

With nice earth and spicy accents leading the finish, which shows a big pop of fruit along with a nice black tea note, this is elegant for its size and cleanses the palate with ripe tannins that linger on the finale. 90pts

[2012 St. Amant Zinfandel Mohr-Fry Vineyard \\$15](#)

A bit of stemmy, bright on the nose with a hint of dried straw and some mineral notes accenting the core of spicy, sweet berry/cherry fruit on the nose. Rich and bright in the mouth with a touch of rounding sweetness supporting chocolatey, dried plum and baked blackberry flavors that show hints of peppery spice on juniper on the backend. Big and juicy with lots of jammy raspberries on the finish, this has power and good clarity. 88pts

[2011 Harney Lane Lodi Zinfandel \\$22](#)

Some sweet charry oak spice and vanilla notes lurks under big blueberry tinged blackberry fruit on the nose with just a hint of blood orange. Plush, broad and yet deep on the palate, with great fruit that has a deep briary core, Grapy with that hint of blood orange on the palate as well. A palate which is packed with jammy blackberry fruit, and chocolate overtones leading to a spicy and somewhat simple finish. This is a pretty big wine, finishing with oaky, creamy, vanilla and butterscotch influence, followed by a hint of balsamic briar, and a cinnamon-sandalwood underlay. You gotta love your oak but if you do this is a wine for you. 88pts

[2011 Fields Family Old Vine Zinfandel \\$24](#)

Fairly intense aromas of loamy earth, plums, ink and violets greet the nose. This really does have an almost floral extract on the nose. Rich and moderately chewy in the mouth, there are some attractively ripe tannins here supporting flavors that are a bit plummy with hints of chocolate and lots of Provençal herb accents making this almost Chateauneufy in the mouth. Lots of red berry fruit shows up on the modest finish. Really quite engaging. 88pts

[2011 Klinker Brick Old Ghost Zinfandel \\$40](#)

Only Klinker Brick Zinfandel aged in French oak,

Spicy, vanilla tinged blueberry fruit on the nose picks up plenty of powdered sugar berry aromas, lots of smoke, lots of nutty oak influence. There's a lot going on here. Silky, deep and vinous in the mouth, this is a bit wiry on the palate with sour red cherry fruit early on the palate. It's still a bit oaky but shows well integrated ginger and tobacco accents balanced by jammy blackberry and blueberry flavors. Supple, and with a fairly long finish, this remains a little jammy but is rather elegant when compared to the rest of the line-up here. Fine grained tannins extend across the backend and clip the finish, which also shows some heat. 88pts

[2012 Fields Family Old Vine Zinfandel \\$24](#)

Watermelon seeds greet the nose which is rather tight and earthy with aromas of hot, dry soil and cactus pads adding detail to the dark mulberry and raspberry aromas. Nicely bright on entry with an

early edge of sweetness and a voluptuous feel. This features lots of clear black plum and candied black raspberry fruit on the palate and shows a moderately long, clean finish. 87pts

[2011 Klinker Brick Zinfandel Marisa Vineyard \\$35](#)

Aged in 100% American oak

Huge vanilla and spice on the nose, which shows some heat, are followed by inky notes early then layers of some green seed spice and spicy toast, allspice, clove, lots of jammy black berry and black cherry fruit. A bit sweet on entry then fairly tannic, linear and finely balanced. There's lots of fruit here, plummy and black cherry toned fruit layered over spicy cinnamon oak. More wood tannins emerge on the backend and clip the black cherry toned finish. tannic and drying and very extracted with a short tough finish. This is a brick house of a wine. Not my style though it is rich and complex. 87pts

[2011 d'Art Zinfandel Tamura Vineyard \\$24](#)

Dry and earthy on the nose with hints of leafy herbs and briary wood laying under a sweet layer of black berry and black raspberry fruit. This is big, rich, and round in the mouth, yet well behaved with lush vanilla tinged blackberry, briary fruit, though it is a bit short on the finish which is spicy and cocoa tinged. Exuberant and lusty. 86pts

[2011 Brazil Zinfandel Lodi \\$15](#)

Spicy, and a little peppery on the nose with an obvious touch of oak adding complexity under nicely earthy and subtly floral toned berry fruit. Rich, round polished and plump in the mouth, this shows off nice acids and soft tannins in a rather easy going, fruity style. The fruit is fresh and red toned, mostly in the strawberry end of the spectrum with good spice accents adding a bit of detail. The finish is a bit short and the acid pokes through a bit turning this a bit tart and harsh on the finish, though some food would fix that right up. 85pts

[2010 d'Art Zinfandel \\$24](#)

Buttery, American oak lays over the sweet nose with lots of toasty spice over a sweet base of coulis of black berry fruit. Elegant on entry, and rather well focused, this is a bit evolved but nicely done with black fruit and peppery spice on the dry and firm palate. Well balanced with spicy woodland black berried fruit and good length, it's an interesting expression of Zinfandel. 85pts

[2011 Klinker Brick Zinfandel Lodi \\$18](#)

Aged in 100% American oak

Big, slightly musky oak filled aromas of loamy soil, toasted oak and sweet mulberry fruit that is a little jammy and caramel driven greet the nose. Vanilla and cherry wood flavors are followed by a big, plump mouthful of jammy red fruits in the mouth. Big, and bold and spicy, this shows a bit of aggressive wood on the palate with wood tannins adding some dryness on the finish even in the face of the rather sweet fruit here. Acids do keep this fresh enough but it is on the sweet and spicy side with wood dominating the finish. 85pts