

# 2009 SJ Terroir Experience

## Lodi and Sierra Foothills, California

*SOMMELIERS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY DELVED INTO THE COMPLEXITIES OF THREE LESSER-KNOWN CALIFORNIA APPELLATIONS.*

RANDY CAPAROSO



The inaugural *Sommelier Journal* Terroir Experience was held March 9-11 in Lodi, Amador, and El Dorado, Calif. This three-day wine immersion, supported by the Lodi Woodbridge Winegrape Commission, the Amador Vintners Association, and El Dorado winegrowers, gave 21 wine professionals an opportunity to discover the regions' widely varying soils, topographies, and elevations and to sample, as attendee Suzanne Llywellyn, CSW, of Santa Monica, Calif., put it, "lots of wine and food."

More than 220 wines were tasted in seminars, on vineyard tours, and in dinners highlighting the local cuisine. While old-vine Zinfandel was a common denominator throughout the experience, there were also opportunities to compare Zinfandel to the similar-but-different (in both sensory and ampelographic terms) Primitivo grape and to a number of phenomenal Syrahs and powerful Petite Sirahs. We also tast-

ed some amazingly rich, fleshy, purple-robed Barberas from the Sierra Foothills, such as St. Amant's Tools of the Trade; some unexpectedly crisp, balanced, fragrant whites, including C.G. Di Arie's Sauvignon Blanc and Bokisch Vineyards' Albariños; and a few complete surprises, like Michael-David Vineyards' dense, varietally focused 2005 Petit Verdot Inkblot and Marco Cappelli's enthrallingly rich, ethereal, sweet Angelica, made from a stand of Mission grapes that has somehow survived the fluctuations of time and history since being planted in Amador's Gold Rush era, circa 1856.

Our first day was devoted to the Lodi American Viticultural Area (AVA). Mark Chandler and Stuart Spencer, program managers of the Lodi Winegrape Commission and *vignerons* in their own right—Spencer is the winemaker and proprietor of St. Amant—detailed three unique aspects of their region:

Photo by Randy Caparoso

## EVENT SPOTLIGHT

- The Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing, a groundbreaking set of environmentally responsible guidelines, based on independent Protected Harvest certification, that have resulted in a stronger expression of terroir in the Lodi wines.
- The recent division of Lodi into seven sub-AVAs of distinct terroirs.
- The productivity of several thousand acres of 50-to-100-plus-year-old Zinfandel vines in the oldest sub-AVA, Mokelumne River—largely head-trained, growing on their own rootstocks in the region's lower-elevation, deep, alluvial, sandy loams.

Our first field trip took us to Jessie's Grove Winery, a Mokelumne River ranch first planted to wheat by Joseph Spenker in 1868 and transformed into vineyards by Joseph and his daughter Jessie in 1888. Jessie's great-grandson, Greg Burns, walked us through the oldest block on the property—rows of majestic bushes, their trunks as thick as trees', still going strong after 121 years—while pouring the 2005 Royal-Tee Zinfandel from those same vines.

Our second stop was the home vineyard of Markus and Liz Bokisch, Lodi newcomers who have been farming some 1,000 acres (80% certi-



*130-year-old Grandpère Vineyard in Amador (left); Greg Burns pours Zinfandel from the oldest vineyard at Jessie's Grove Winery in Mokelumne River, Lodi (above); Markus Bokisch points out his low-to-the-ground rows of Spanish varieties (below).*

fied according to the Lodi Rules) since 1995. Forty of these acres are now dedicated to the Bokisches' own label of intriguing Spanish varieties. Markus Bokisch provided our first dramatic example of the effects of Lodi terroir, contrasting his 2007 Albariño—a lush, honeyed, tropical garden of a white, grown in Mokelumne River's sandy loam—with the 2007 Albariño Clements Hills. Vinified in exactly the same way in stainless steel, the latter showed a steely, flinty, citrus-peel profile (very Rías Baixas), reflecting the leaner, sloping, slightly elevated, gravelly, volcanic clay of the Clements Hills. Consultant Barry Gnekow poured a sampling of his other clients' wines along with a catered lunch in the Bokisches' dining room.

That afternoon, we toured vineyards in the Lodi sub-AVAs of both Clements Hills and Jahant, driving east toward the Sierra Foothills and away from the influence of the Sacramento River Delta. In an evening winemakers' dinner at Berghold Estate Winery, Joe and Kay Berghold showed off their magnificent collection of American Victorian antiques, including a 26-foot carved-mahogany bar that had been rescued from a 19th-century brothel. Highlights of local terroir poured by the Lodi winemakers were Michael-David's mesmerizing 2006 Zinfandel Lust, from 40- and 91-year-old vines, and a barrel sample of the hammering, velvet-layered 2007 m2 Wines Petite Sirah Artist Series.

The second day, Amador Vintners executive director Jamie Lubenko led our bus up into the Sierra Foothills, starting at a 300-foot altitude on the eastern edge of Lodi and quickly climb-



Photos by David Vogels



*Left to right: UC-Davis's Dr. Donna Hirschfelt and Terra d'Oro's Kevin Steward and Jeff Meyers describing Amador soil types (top left); Chaim Gur-Arieh of C.G. Di Arie displaying his customized submerged-cap fermenters (top right) and leading a tasting (above).*

ing to the 1,200-to-2,000-foot elevations of the Shenandoah Valley's historic Gold Rush country. Here, gnarly vines and blue oaks crouch like bent old men on rolling hills of mostly poor, sandy-clay loams from ancient, decomposed granite. Like Lodi, Amador falls within

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In our initial immersion at Terra d'Oro (the new name for the MonteVina winery), Dr. Donna Hirschfelt of UC-Davis talked about Amador's “marginality,” comparing viticulture to growing potted plants: “In contrast to Napa Valley, where vines are grown in deep pots filled with a heavy clay that retains lots of water, Amador is like growing in a much smaller pot, with lots of sand holding very little water,” she explained. “But it is easier to give plants more to fight than it is to beat them down to size, which is why, in classic wine regions, great wines come from vines grown in balance, without excessive growth.” Terra d'Oro general manager Jeff Meyers and vineyard manager Kevin Steward presented a fascinating display of 5-foot-deep soil samples from their vineyards, specially assembled for



this seminar, and winemaker Chris Leamy then took us through a tasting of recent releases and barrel samples.

We stopped by the 130-year-old, own-rooted Grandpère vineyard, where we were not allowed to walk as a precaution against transporting phylloxera on our shoes. Over lunch at C.G. Di Arie, an estate perched on a gorgeous Shenandoah Valley hilltop, we were treated to a tasting hosted by an Amador old-timer, Leon Sobon (whose Sobon and Shenandoah properties were among the first solar-powered wineries and certified-organic vineyards in the state), and a relative new-timer, Chaim Gur-Arieh of C.G. Di Arie. Gur-Arieh showed off his contemporary but terroir-driven wines, most notably a 2007 Barbera, a 2005 Syrah Southern Exposure, and a 2007 Petite Sirah—each black as night, saturated with varietal fruit, and filled with as much muscle as fine-grained polish.

In the afternoon, Marco Cappelli (formerly of Napa Valley's Swanson Vineyards and now a Foothills grower and consulting winemaker) took over, guiding us through the 2,000-to-3,000-foot mountain vineyards of El Dorado County. We saw a clear transition from the flora of Amador to black oaks and pine trees, growing in meager soils formed primarily by the decomposition of plant life, granite, slate, and

*Photos by David Vogels (top), Randy Caparoso (bottom)*

sand. The Region III climate here is moderated by cooling winds from the Sierras. At Miraflores Winery, we learned more about the region from pioneering winemaker John MacCready of Sierra Vista Winery. Our group was wowed by the little-known wines of El Dorado, poured by the producers; like the terroir itself, the red wines displayed sky-high aromatics, with solid cores of extract and tannin and hints of the stone and slate in the soil. Highlights included a lusciously concentrated 2005 Perry Creek Zinfandel; a violet- and chocolate-studded 2005 Miraflores Syrah; a sinewy, fleshed-out 2005 Windwalker Petite Sirah; and a burly, blackcurranty 2005 Sierra Vista Cabernet Sauvignon Five Star Reserve.

Dinner was served back in Amador County, at the award-winning Taste restaurant in Plymouth. A walk-around tasting of 22 Amador wines, accompanied by an appetizer of truffled “cigars,” was followed by a pairing of 16 more Amador bottlings with a five-course dinner. My favorite match: C.G. Di Arie’s floral, meaty, *garigue*-like Southern Exposure Syrah with a rib eye of veal and hedgehog mushrooms in rosemary-infused jus.

On day three, we sat down at the headquarters hotel for a double-blind tasting of 24



Marco Cappelli leading a tour through El Dorado County (top); tasting Amador wines at Taste restaurant in Plymouth (above).

### PARTICIPATING WINERIES

#### LODI

Benson Ferry Vineyards  
Berghold Estate Winery  
Bokisch Vineyards  
D'Art Wines  
Harmony Wynelands  
Jessie's Grove  
Joel Gott Wines  
Klinker Brick Winery  
LangeTwins Winery & Vineyards  
Las Lomas Vineyard  
Macchia Wines  
Michael-David Winery  
Mettler Family Vineyards  
m2 Wines  
Peltier Station  
Ripken Vineyards  
St. Amant Winery  
Uvaggio  
Valhalla Cellars

#### AMADOR

C.G. Di Arie  
Domaine de la Terre Rouge/Easton Wines  
Drytown Cellars  
Jeff Runquist Wines  
Renwood Winery  
Sobon Estate  
Terra d'Oro/  
MonteVina Winery  
Vino Noceto

#### EL DORADO

Boeger Winery  
Fitzpatrick Winery  
Iverson Vineyards & Winery  
Jodar Winery  
Madroña Vineyards  
Miraflores Winery  
Perry Creek Winery  
Sierra Vista Vineyards & Winery  
Windwalker Vineyard

Zinfandels, representing all three regions (see this month's Tasting Panel, p. 18). Lunch was a Lodi-style barbecue at Michael-David's Philips Farm Fruitstand & Café. At the table next to us, eight grape growers were poring over their Lodi Rules checklists with Dr. Clifford Ohmart, a prime mover in Lodi's green revolution. At our table, 10 more bottles of the richest imaginable wines, including Macchia's satin-and-lace 2007 Zinfandel Voluptuous and Michael-David's blueberry dream of a red, the 2005 Petite Sirah Earthquake, were sampled. Of course, you know what we were talking about: next year's Terroir Experience. The dates and location will be announced in the fall; we hope to see you there. 🍷