



Tim's Wine Market

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This month, we will examine two different California Cabernet Sauvignons from Lodi and Paso Robles. While we often think of both of these regions as large, homogenous growing regions, in reality they are far more nuanced. Both areas have been sub-divided into smaller areas that reflect consistent climate and soil differences from the body at large. This is a great chance to learn about these areas, especially given the shortages we are going to experience from the North Coast in the coming months.

2017 Klinker Brick Cabernet Sauvignon - \$18

Looking over the archive, it has been a while since I selected a wine from the Lodi region of California, so let's take a moment to describe this area. Lodi is a town that lies two hours east, and a little north, of San Francisco, in the northern points of the vast Central Valley. Several rivers run through the region, starting in the nearby Sierra Nevada mountains and cutting across the state to form the vast Sacramento River delta. For millions of years, these rivers have eroded the mountains and carried the fine sand and silt west, depositing it in what is today the Lodi region. Unlike many of the coastal growing regions of California, this area has very few issues with water, and as such this region is well known not just for grapes, but also tomatoes and melons.

In addition to the nutrient-rich soils, the climate of Lodi is also ideal for grape growing. Each day during the growing season, the sun heats the land up quickly, but by late afternoon the cool breezes follow the rivers out of the mountains and cause the temperature to drop. In fact, on many summer nights you may want to put on a jacket, as the diurnal temperature swings can run as much as 40 degrees. This allows for a long, slow growing season that is perfect for late ripening varieties like Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon.

For years, we in the trade have considered Lodi as one homogenous region, as most of the wines produced there were entry level, simple examples. Like many other growing regions in California, the producers in Lodi started to recognize the differences between some of the areas around the appellation and the quality of the fruit they produce. In 2005, a collection of growers began studying the climate and soils of several areas, and in 2006, seven sub-AVAs were created. These areas, Alta Mesa, Borden Ranch, Clements Hills, Cosumnes River, Jahant, Mokelumne River and Sloughhouse, are recognized for unique attributes and the affect on crops. The biggest differences are daytime temperatures, the amount of volcanic and clay soils and how long the fog effects their growing day. Now many producers use this information for planting or selecting vineyards for a specific type of wine, which you will see below.

Many of the vineyards in Lodi, like that of our feature, were founded after the gold rush in the late 1800s. In the case of Klinker Brick, owners Steve and Lori Felten represent the fifth generation of their family to grow grapes in Lodi. For most of their history, the family sold their grapes to cooperatives and larger family wineries, but in 2000, they began to produce wine under their own label.

Like most Lodi producers, the Feltens focused on Zinfandel, which thrives in this region. Recognizing the importance of Cabernet Sauvignon, they started to scour the Lodi district for the perfect place to grow it and found an ideal site: the Bechtold Vineyard southeast of town. This vineyard was planted in 1983 and sits in soils with more volcanic material that is common in the area. It is also close to the Mokelumne River and at slightly higher elevation, both factors meaning the daytime temperatures are slightly cooler than the surrounding area.

When you are ready to drink this wine, please decant it for half an hour before serving. Once you do, the nose is a dramatic combination of fresh cut cedar, baker's chocolate, cooked red cherries, blackberries and cola syrup. On the palate it is quite dense for this price, with a fairly obvious sense of oak but plenty of fruit to stand up to it. Drink this wine 2021-2026 with smoked beef ribs or a standing rib roast.

2018 Inception Cabernet Sauvignon - \$25

Earlier this year we featured the Red Wine from Inception, which has turned into one of our top-selling wines in the Orlando store for 2021. Shortly after that feature, owner Jon Hirsh came into the Orange Avenue store with an unmarked bottle and a big smile on his face. When I asked him what was going on, he said, “grab a glass, I need you to try something.” What he had was a pre-bottling sample of his first Cabernet Sauvignon, a wine made from Paso Robles grapes. While a little disjointed, there was no mistaking what was in the bottle: a really stunning example of Cabernet Sauvignon.

To remind everyone of Jon’s story, he originally started making Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from the cool climates of Santa Barbara and Central California. Born and raised in Los Angeles, he would frequently escape to the area and fell in love with the elegant, less in-your-face qualities than wines from Northern California. His day job, which is providing apparel to Disney World, brought him to Orlando in mid-2019. Since then we have become good friends, as Jon is also an avid collector of great Bordeaux and Burgundy.

Understanding Jon’s jump from a Pinot Noir/Chardonnay specialist to a Cabernet producer is not hard. He is the consummate networker and was well entrenched in the LA restaurant and wine scene. He quickly found himself sourcing wines for private label clients, Wolfgang Puck and Delta Airlines to name just a couple, using his network of growers in the Central Coast. Of course they were all clamoring for a Cabernet Sauvignon as well, so he went looking, keeping his focus in the Central Coast. Logically he landed in Paso Robles, where he is now producing 3,600 cases of this little gem.

Like Lodi, Paso Robles is a sprawling AVA that has been sub-divided to better represent the differences in growing conditions. Many years ago, we used to define Paso Robles by “east side” or “west side,” with the demarcation line being US 101. In those days, we naively called the west side cooler due to elevation and proximity to the ocean, and the east side as hot. The reality is the differences between the 11 sub zones of Paso Robles are far more nuanced than that. Much of the region is at elevation on both sides of 101. In fact, one of the sub-zones is called “Highland District,” and it is quite far east of the town of Paso. There are also several rivers in the area that change the climate daily in a way that has big effects over a growing season. Finally, thanks to the high number of hills, vineyards in this area can have very different expositions to the sun even within the same sub-zone. The lesson is that it is never good to generalize about a wine region.

For our wine, Jon has sourced from two vineyards: the Estrella and Highland districts. While not as high in elevation, the Estrella region benefits from the cooling effect of the river from which it takes its name. Grapes from this area ripen slower and provide good color and structure to the wine. The remaining grapes come from the Highland District, which is quite hot during the day but cools rapidly at night. For Jon’s wine, this contributes a punch of fruit mid-palate and some length.

When you are ready to drink this wine, please make sure to decant it for half an hour before serving. Once you do, this wine pops from the glass with an inviting combination of fresh red cherries, cooked blueberries, newly sawn cedar, crushed spearmint and milk chocolate. On the palate the ample fruit is framed by soft, wood tannins and moderate acidity. Drink this wine from 2021-2028 with a roast leg of lamb, crown roast of pork or wild mushroom pasta.

Alton Brown’s Steak on Coals

Space is limited and let’s face it, does anything go better with Cabernet than a steak? Here is a recipe that is ridiculously simple but yields amazing results if you have a charcoal grill. Read and follow the directions closely, because this one is all about technique. For a better explanation Google the video.

**2 pounds inside skirt steak,
cut into three equal pieces
1 teaspoon kosher salt**

Remove the steak from the fridge and lay over a cooling rack set in a half sheet pan and season the steak with salt. Rest for 45 minutes at room temperature.

Fire up one chimney starter of natural lump charcoal. Once white and ashy, distribute evenly in the lower level of your charcoal grill. Using a blow dryer, blow the charcoal clean of ash.

Immediately lay steaks directly onto the hot coals for 35 to 40 seconds, then flip and repeat. When finished cooking, place the meat onto heavy duty aluminum foil, wrap, and rest for 15 minutes. Remove the meat from the foil, reserving foil and juices. Slice thinly across the grain of the meat. Return the meat to the foil and toss with the juice. Serve immediately.