



Tim's Wine Market

April 2025

By Lee Pancake

This release brings together two bold expressions of California terroir, each shaped by the raw power of ancient geology and the dedication of family vintners. From the sun-drenched Lodi plains to the rugged volcanic slopes of the Sierra Foothills, Klinker Brick's Cabernet Sauvignon and Lava Cap's Merlot both capture the intensity of their origins. With rich fruit, elegant structure, and a deep sense of place, these wines tell a story of perseverance, craftsmanship, and the undeniable magic of the Golden State.

2022 Klinker Brick Cabernet Sauvignon | \$25 per bottle

At first glance, Lodi might not seem like the promised land for Cabernet Sauvignon. The region's reputation has long leaned on its Zinfandel fame with thick-trunked vines planted by early 20th-century pioneers. These vines typically bake in the sun and yield jammy, sometimes massive reds that have anchored countless blends over the decades. But Lodi is not always a monolith. If you know where to look and you understand the rhythm of the Delta breezes, the nuance of the sandy loam soils of the Mokelumne River, and the value of patient, attentive farming, you find wines like this: Cabernet with structure, polish, and personality.

The 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon from Klinker Brick is a love letter to Lodi's southern edges, where the vines are cradled between the cooling influence of the Sacramento/San Joaquin River Delta and the rising foothills of the Sierra Nevada. The Felten family, fifth-generation growers, have lived on this land since the early 1900s. While they made their name with Zinfandel, which they started bottling under their own label in 2000, over time their Cabernet program has quietly become one of the most consistent and compelling in the region.

Sourced primarily from estate vineyards within the Mokelumne River AVA, the fruit here benefits from deep, well-drained sandy loam soils. Though sandy loam has a deceptively light texture, it is capable of retaining just enough moisture to carry the vines through the long, dry Central Valley summer. This is where the "Golden State" gets its hue: by late August, the surrounding hillsides turn sun-bleached and brittle, with a vast sea of amber grass that shimmers under an endless sky. The vineyards, however, nourished by thoughtful irrigation and rooted in family knowledge, stay green and resilient.

In 2022, a warm but even growing season yielded fruit of exceptional ripeness and balance. Harvest occurred in the early morning hours to preserve freshness, with grapes brought in cool and sorted with extreme care. Fermentation took place in stainless steel tanks, with daily pump-overs to ensure gentle extraction of color and tannin. Maceration times averaged 15–18 days, which is long enough to build structure without veering into over-extraction and bitterness.

Aged for 15 months in 60% new oak, predominantly French, the wine showcases Cabernet Sauvignon's classic profile with a subtle Lodi signature. Black cherry and currant lead the nose, with secondary notes of vanilla bean, pencil shavings, and dried tobacco leaf. On the palate, there is richness, but not too much weight. The tannins are fine-grained and well-integrated, framing layers of dark plum, cocoa nib, and baking spice. A fresh thread of acidity lifts the finish, leaving behind a trace of crushed herbs and graphite.

Make sure to decant it for at least 30 minutes before serving so you can experience this wine at its full capability. The 2022 vintage is one of their finest Cabernets yet, and stands as a testament to the evolution of Lodi and to the power of quiet craftsmanship. No flash, no gimmicks, just honest wine made by people who have been farming this land long before it became a dot on the fine wine map. And it's not just a winemaker's wine, it's a wine for the table! Pair it with grilled ribeye, lamb kebabs, or even a lentil and mushroom stew.

2023 Lava Cap Merlot | \$30 per bottle

It takes a particular kind of stubbornness, or maybe quiet conviction, to plant Merlot on a steep volcanic slope in the Sierra Nevada foothills, 2,600 feet above sea level. But the Jones family, founders of Lava Cap Winery, have never chased

trends or bowed to fashion. Since 1981, they have worked this rugged land just outside Placerville, coaxing beauty and balance out of fractured rock and thin mountain air.

The 2022 Merlot is a testament to the family's vision and a compelling reminder that Merlot, when treated with care and grown in the right place, can be every bit as profound as its more fashionable cousins. Lava Cap's estate vineyards are perched on decomposed volcanic lahar flows; ancient mudslides of ash and lava that blanketed the Sierra foothills some 4 to 10 million years ago. This raw, nutrient-poor soil forces the vines to dig deep, producing fruit with uncommon concentration and structure. For Merlot, this is a near-ideal setting: the vineyard sits in a low-lying draw, its dense soils helping to decrease yields, while cooler, north and west-facing aspects slow down ripening and preserve acidity.

The elevation plays a crucial role here. At 2,400 to 2,600 feet above sea level, daytime warmth is tempered by brisk mountain breezes and cool nights. This diurnal swing is key: sugars rise, but phenolics and acids mature in tandem. The result? Merlot that is plush but not soft, fresh without being green, and deeply varietal without descending into caricature.

In 2022, the fruit was harvested in two separate passes, an earlier picking bringing lift and aromatics, while a later harvest added depth and texture. Each lot was fermented in stainless steel, with two gentle pump-overs per day and temperatures never exceeding 80°F, a choice that preserves the wine's finer aromatic threads and keeps tannin extraction restrained rather than aggressive. Aging took place over 18 months in 100% French oak, specifically from François Frères cooperage, lending subtle spice and well-knit structure without overshadowing the fruit.

What's in the glass is pure Sierra Foothills: dark plum, wild blueberry, and black cherry, laced with dried thyme, cocoa nib, and just a hint of smoky basalt. The oak is present but restrained, wrapping around the fruit like a wool cloak; not flashy, but comforting and protective. The wine opens slowly, gaining amplitude with air, so be sure to decant this wine prior to serving. The finish is what really sets this wine apart, showcasing a mineral lift that speaks clearly of its volcanic origins.

This is not supermarket Merlot, nor is it trying to be Right Bank Bordeaux. It is something uniquely Californian; rugged, high-elevation, and lovingly crafted by a family that have been walking these rows for over four decades. This wine pairs nicely with roasted duck, mushroom risotto, or even just a long conversation beside a well built fire.

Lamb Shish-Kabob

This is a hot take, but I personally do not care for onions and peppers grilled with the meat for a shish kabob. I find the veggies are always underdone and if you cook them long enough to soften the meat is then overdone. I prefer to prepare separate skewers of peppers, onions and meat, and grill them separately until each is perfect. For that reason this recipe does not include veggies, but feel free to cut them up and add to the marinade if you like. Either way this is a great recipe for both features this month, or any full bodied red wine.

½ cup packed fresh cilantro leaves

3 medium cloves garlic, peeled

¼ cup dark raisins

½ teaspoon garam masala

1 ½ tablespoons lemon juice

½ cup olive oil

1 teaspoon table salt

⅛ teaspoon ground black pepper

**2 ¼ pounds boneless lamb leg (shank end),
trimmed of fat and silver skin and cut into 1-inch
pieces**

Marinade: Process all ingredients in work bowl of food processor fitted with steel blade until smooth, about 1 minute, stopping to scrape sides of work bowl with rubber spatula as needed.

Shish Kabob: Toss marinade and lamb in gallon-sized zipper-lock plastic bag or large, nonreactive bowl; seal bag, pressing out as much air as possible, or cover bowl and refrigerate until fully seasoned, at least 2 hours and up to 24 hours.

Bring your grill to temperature, or use the broiler feature in your oven. Thread the meat onto metal skewers, or bamboo skewers that have been soaked for a half hour in water. Grill kebabs, uncovered, until meat is well browned all over, grill-marked, and cooked to medium-rare, about 7 minutes (or 8 minutes for medium), turning each kebab one-quarter turn every 1 ¾ minutes to brown all sides. Transfer kebabs to serving platter, squeeze lemon over kebabs if desired.