

How to Keep Lodi Zinfandel Economically Sustainable

by *Jim Gordon*
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Winemakers speaking at the Zinfandel Technical Workshop in Lodi were, from left, Mike McCay, McCay Cellars; Tegan Passalacqua, Turley Wine Cellars; Derek DeVries, Michael David Winery; Chad Joseph, Oak Farm Vineyards and Joseph Wineworks.

Lodi winemakers and grape growers, feeling an economic squeeze on their famous old-vine Zinfandel vineyards, recently spent a day strategizing how to save those vines by increasing the quality of grapes they produce and boosting the prices they command.

“We have these beautiful old Zinfandel vineyards, and these are important in the hearts and minds of everyone here,” said the executive director of the Lodi Winegrape Commission, Stuart Spencer, in his opening remarks. “They help us connect with winemakers across California and with people around the world. Ultimately we need consumers to be willing to pay more for these.”

Zinfandel was the third biggest producing grape variety in the state in 2017, according to the Grape Crush Report, behind Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, and averaged \$591 per ton compared to Cabernet's \$1,553. In Crush District 11, home to Lodi, the average for Zinfandel was slightly higher at \$642 per ton.

Do old vines pencil out?

Ask most growers if that price pencils out as sustainable for fruit from old vines producing no more than 5 tons per acre and the answer will be no. That's why many of them are converting older, head-trained vineyards that earn the average price or less by removing the old vines and replacing them with more densely planted, higher-yielding vines. Eight tons or more per acre multiplied by the average makes more financial sense.

One of four growers speaking during the Nov. 14 National Zinfandel Day Technical Workshop at Oak Farm Vineyards was Markus Bokisch of Bokisch Ranches. He introduced himself--tongue in cheek--as a uni-generational Lodi grower, unlike many of the fourth and fifth generation farm family members in the audience.

Bokisch said that in his relatively new Vista Luna vineyard he needs to gross \$6,000 per acre and is close to achieving that at \$1,100 per ton on average, even while selling a portion to Fetzer as low as \$800. But in his recently acquired 12-acre Sues Vineyard, planted in the 1920s, 1930s and 1960s, it's a different equation. The vines had been dry-farmed and yielded only 1 ton per acre, which was obviously not sustainable, so he got to work.

Bokisch installed sub-surface drip irrigation, filled blanks in the vineyard with 10% new vines and paid close attention to the vines' health and productivity. He now harvests 2.5 tons per acre of high-quality fruit and averages about \$1,600 per ton. "And since it's also head trained, I don't need to get as much per acre as a newer vineyard because it took less investment" in trellis posts, wires and labor."

\$1,500 for Lodi Rules fruit

Tegan Passalacqua of Zin-specialist Turley Wine Cellars was one of four winemakers on the program. Turley buys Zinfandel from 50 vineyards around the state, including seven in Lodi. He said that high quality Lodi grapes should command more than \$1,200 per ton, and Lodi Rules fruit--certified sustainable--should get \$1,500.

Passalacqua now owns a small Lodi vineyard himself. He asked, "Why are there so many old vineyards? It's because wineries wanted those grapes." That, in turn, is because consumers like the taste of Lodi Zinfandel, he continued. "I think everybody should be making Lodi Zinfandel. It's smooth and easy to appreciate. The best wines in the world are not manipulated wines picked at high sugar with added acid, but wines made in a more natural way like we can here."

He added, "More markets around the country are really falling in love with Zin. Even in markets that were more snobbish, Zinfandel is now starting to hit its stride with the consumer."

Passalacqua said that the price per ton issue is more critical with large plots. He advised, "If you're a grower out there feeling the pressure, keep your best 10 acres of old vines. The average price for Zinfandel in Napa is now \$4,000. It's going to eventually pull up the price of Zinfandel here, but you have to be patient."

Lodi-based consulting winemaker Chad Joseph agreed. “Honestly, we’re in scary times. Right now I see an oversupply, but your Zinfandel is going to be worth a lot in the future. I hope the good vineyards that stay will be the great vineyards of the future. Keep at it and don’t give up.”

Mike McCay, owner of Lodi’s McCay Cellars, addressed the authenticity of single-vineyard and old-vine Zinfandels. “I am actually very optimistic about the future of Zinfandel sales,” he said. “Our consumers are looking for uniqueness. Building that uniqueness in your vineyard, in your winery, is important, and having your own style. When individuals have a chance to taste that they get excited.”

How to raise your vineyard’s image

What can growers do to make better Zinfandel and command higher prices? Below are nine tips shared by grower Bruce Fry of Lodi’s Mohr Fry ranch. He said his father started taking these marketing/branding steps in 1995, inspired by Robert Young Vineyard in Sonoma County.

- Over deliver on quality. Identify your best blocks of head-trained Zinfandel and farm them for high-quality even if you convert a majority of your acreage to trellis and high yields.
- Obtain a winegrape grower certification license so you can custom crush your own grapes to make samples to show to winery buyers.
- Tell your story. What’s your family history in farming and what’s the history of your vineyard? Is it certified sustainable? Organic?
- Name your vineyard, use signage to raise awareness, and trademark the name.
- Ask for wineries to use a vineyard designation on bottles made with your grapes.
- Be conscious of your “farmscape.” Fry keeps everything neat and plants roses to dress up the approach to their vineyards. “People ask us why we do that. Well it’s because it sells grapes.”
- Overdeliver on logistics. Provide delivery in different size bins. Weigh your fruit on a certified scale and haul them wherever needed.
- Communicate extensively with the buyers throughout the season, on crop level, disease pressure etc. Keep in touch with your winemakers when they move to new jobs.
- Get the awards. Track awards and ratings given to wines made from your grapes, whether vineyard-designated or not. Share these with potential buyers.

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