

## WINERY OF THE MONTH

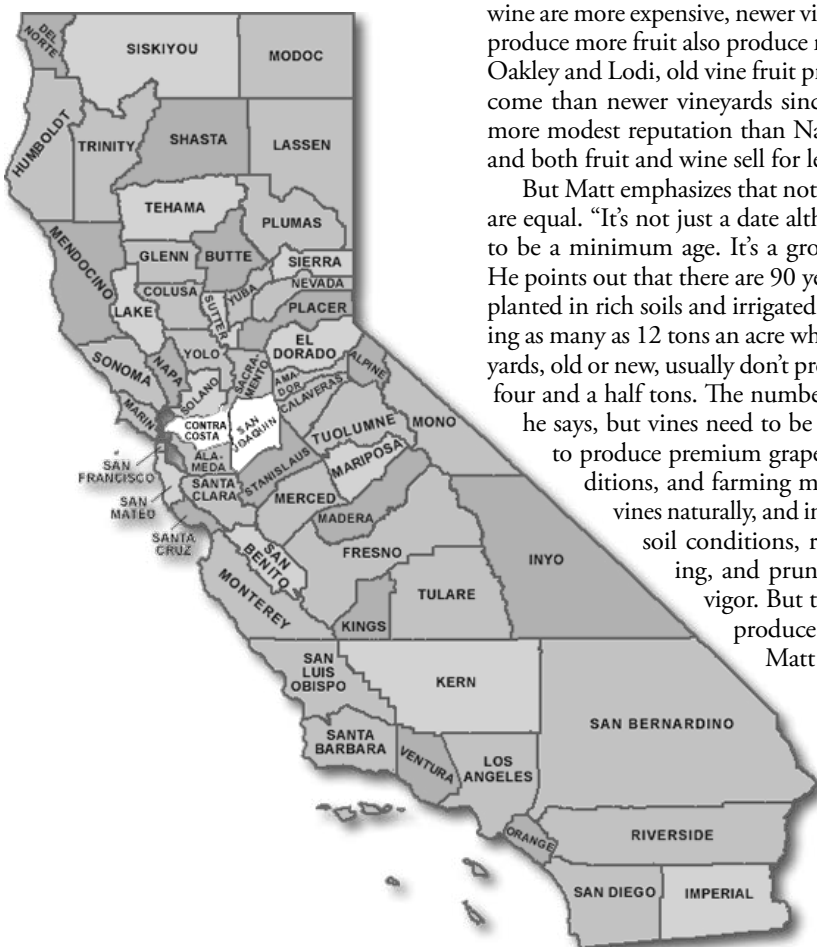


# CELEBRATIONS WINE CLUB

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LODI,  
SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY  
AND  
OAKLEY,  
CONTRA COSTA COUNTY



### WINERY from cover

The other important component that contributed to the survival of these old vineyards is that in Oakley and Lodi, they were economically viable whereas in Napa and most of Sonoma they were not. In Sonoma, a few old vineyards remain in Dry Creek Valley and Alexander Valley. Old vines produce less fruit, so in expensive wine growing areas like Napa, where both the land and the finished wine are more expensive, newer vigorous vines that produce more fruit also produce more revenue. In Oakley and Lodi, old vine fruit produces more income than newer vineyards since the area has a more modest reputation than Napa and Sonoma and both fruit and wine sell for less.

But Matt emphasizes that not all old vineyards are equal. "It's not just a date although there's got to be a minimum age. It's a growing situation." He points out that there are 90 year-old vineyards planted in rich soils and irrigated that are producing as many as 12 tons an acre when the best vineyards, old or new, usually don't produce more than four and a half tons. The numbers are debatable,

he says, but vines need to be stressed in order to produce premium grapes. Age, soil conditions, and farming methods stress the vines naturally, and in newer vineyards soil conditions, rootstock, trellising, and pruning control vine vigor. But the best old vines produce "bolder" wines, Matt says.

In addition to grape quality, old vineyards offer a window into the past. Wine growing has changed dramatically since the second half of the

1960s when single grape varieties became popular. "We decided to plant the "finest" grape varieties in the world, and back then it was Bordeaux and Burgundy, according to the oenophiles in Great Britain, because they built the Bordeaux trade," Matt says. So consumers were educated with Cabernet, Chardonnay, Merlot, and later Syrah and Pinot Noir. The heritage varieties and blends of old California were forgotten, except for Zinfandel and to a lesser extent Petite Sirah. But Matt Cline hasn't forgotten. He champions Mataro, Carignane, Alicante Bouschet, and Black Malvoisie along with Zinfandel and Petite Sirah, which he prefers to blend like the early wines of California. "We've handcuffed ourselves, I think, with this marketing of single varietal wines. It may have gotten more people to drink wine. I don't know. But I think blended wines are better

wines. I haven't met a perfect grape yet, but I've tasted some near perfect blends."

Matt points out that fifty years ago and earlier, all grapes were priced alike, and the emphasis was on quality, not particular varieties. Wine growers and makers planted whatever they felt did the best in their vineyards and blended their wines in whatever quantities produced the best results. "Each varietal brings something to the blend," he says. Petite Sirah brings pepper, structure, color, spice elements. Carignane brings acidity, Alicante color." He goes on to say that these sturdier grapes blend beautifully with Grenache and Zinfandel, which are less complex varieties but have vivacious fruit flavors. But while Matt thrives on California heritage grapes, what used to be called *Mixed Black*, he's clear that the wines that we now drink, made from these same grapes, "definitely taste infinitely better than those wines did then. The vines weren't necessarily old, and they weren't using cold fermentation and modern techniques. They didn't have the benefit of the experimentation that's been done over the years. We have advanced."

What does the future portend for old vines? Are today's new vines tomorrow's old ones? Maybe not. When a particular variety goes out of favor, farmers are quick to graft over their vineyards to new market stars. Many fine Merlot vineyards were grafted over to Pinot Noir when consumers clamored for more of it. Zinfandel vineyards comprise most of the oldest ones in California only because when the grape went out of favor in the 1970s, Sutter Home disguised it as White Zinfandel, and a new market was born. The vineyards remained economically viable. Otherwise Zinfandel might have been a memory along with the other heritage grapes that are Matt's focus, Zinfandel may never have reemerged as the premium wine that it has become had the vineyards not been in place.

Matt is a champion of not only heritage grapes but also a structured style that has been eclipsed in the market place by smooth, high-alcohol wines. What happens with high alcohol wines, he explains, is that they don't allow yeasts to fully ferment the sugars to dryness so that a certain amount of residual sugar remains. "Residual sugar masks alcohol, masks the heat, but it also masks acidity and length. It also masks tannin. So these wines taste rich, not structure. There's no question that it's a successful style. But we don't believe in residual sugar, so our wines are structured. But there's room for all of us." And there's certainly room for boldly flavored wines that are balanced and textured and taste like the grapes from which they were made and the fields from which they grew. In fact, many young winemakers are moving in Matt's direction, which is now referred to as *natural winemaking*. As the adage goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

California

## Winery of the Month

### THREE: The dirt, the micro-climate, and sustainable wine-growing from vineyard to bottle

*Three Wine Company*



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The term "old vines" on a wine label strikes an important note although not a precise one. Are these the vines that covered the castle when Sleeping Beauty checked out for a hundred years? Probably not. Although old vines can thrive for a century or more and produce delicious fruit, the term suggests not only the age of vines but also perhaps a particular grape variety like Zinfandel or some other more unusual grape. But most important, the term is a unique statement of quality.

Matt Cline (pictured above) has thought more about old vines than probably any other winemaker in California. They have captured his imagination and respect to the extent that he has devoted his entire winery to their advancement. Matt's career began with his brother Fred's at Cline Cellars in Sonoma, where Matt was the winemaker for 16 years. In 2001, Matt started Trinitas Cellars in Napa and sold five years later. Since then he has devoted himself to a third winery, *Three* for "small, sweet, sips," which has morphed into a hardier definition, "dirt, micro-climate, and sustainable wine-growing," all descriptors of the heritage grapes and old vineyards that Matt chases. The winery is located in Clarksburg in Yolo County, not far from where it all began for Matt on his grandfather's farm in Oakley, Contra Costa County. Matt and his eight siblings grew up in Los Angeles but spent summers on the farm where his

mother grew up. The area, including neighboring Lodi, happened to be a repository of wine history with more old vineyards than anywhere else in California.

Two events destroyed California vineyards, Prohibition in the 1920s and the root louse phylloxera in the late 1980s and 1990s. Oakley and Lodi vineyards escaped both plagues. People could legally make wine for their own consumption during Prohibition. While most California vineyards were rotting away without markets, Oakley and Lodi vineyard owners were shipping most of their grapes to home winemakers in Vancouver, Chicago, and New York. Their fruit ripened faster than cooler California regions and arrived by Labor Day, the first long weekend in late summer when families could marshal their numbers and make wine together. So most Oakley and Lodi vineyards continued to be viable during the 13 destructive years of Prohibition.

Later, the phylloxera root louse would devastate California vineyards, but once again Oakley and Lodi would be spared. In Oakley, the meandering Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers deposited high concentrations of sand in the soil, and phylloxera is unable to survive in sandy soils. The same was true of Lodi, where the Sacramento, Mokelumne, and San Joaquin rivers dumped sand in deep deposits.

See **WINERY** back page

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