

# Pizazz Zin FROM PIAZZA RANCH, LODI

Charlie Piazza always knew he would be a farmer. So, it is no surprise that after half a century in agriculture the grapes he grows are some of the best to come out of Lodi. Charlie started farming with his father while he was in high school, and after a four year break to play football at the University of Utah, he has kept at it so long his confidence and success in his craft are unquestionable.

## **The Piazza Ranch and Vineyard**

Driving through Lodi is a scenic journey past picturesque cattle ranches, dairy farms, fruit and nut farms and lots of vineyards. Charlie Piazza's vineyard stands out, with its gnarly, head-trained vines planted in perfect rows on his perfectly manicured 80 acres of land. In 1973, Charlie bought a 160 acre lot that had previously been used as a dairy farm and made the decision to plant grapevines. It took 3 years to convert all 160 acres to vines, while trying to make ends meet growing tomatoes and bell peppers on the plots that didn't have vines on them. When Charlie had finally finished laboriously planting his vines by hand, the only readily available contracts for Lodi grapegrowers were with big production wineries. Some of the wineries Charlie sold his Zinfandel to over the years informed him his grapes went to a reserve wine program, some years to Zin blends labeled Lodi, and one vintage even went into a White Zinfandel wine. Much to his frustration, there were some years he didn't know into which wines his Zinfandel was blended.



42 year old head-trained Zinfandel, Piazza Vineyard, Lodi, California.



Piazza Vineyard Old Vine Zinfandel.

In 1988, Charlie sold off half his acreage in order to maintain his high standard of farming, and kept 80 of the original acres, still working the vineyards himself. As his daughter Katie says, "What he won't tell you about himself is that he does all the work in the vineyard, and has from day one." Looking at Charlie and the beauty of his property, it's easy to believe he tends to his vines by hand. There is not a dead vine or empty stake in Charlie's vineyard, every head-trained vine has a thick wooden stake to help it grow up straight and strong. There is no doubt that he has put every effort into making sure his vines are healthy and able to produce flavor-packed Zinfandel.

## **Why Lodi? Why not Lodi?**

With all the time and effort he puts into his vineyard, Charlie says, "It gets frustrating to see your neighbor who does nothing in their vineyard get the same amount of money because they have lots of sugar in their fruit." For Charlie, this is one of the biggest issues: Lodi's image as the source for cheap and sweet Zinfandel. Lodi has a long history with wine, dating back to the 1850's. Today, over 100,000 acres of this robust agricultural region are planted to vines. More and more, growers like Charlie Piazza are trying to upgrade the image of Lodi Zinfandel to reflect the quality of their efforts.

"Lodi can be just as good as Sonoma. The problem in Lodi is that there are still some people who talk about high tonnage. They don't say, 'Hey, I have a beautiful crop.'" Growers who want a high quality of grapes keep the yield of grapes per acre, or tonnage, lower. There is scientific evidence to back the quality of lower yield vineyards, and many of the great wine producing regions in the world follow this practice. But, this means less money for the grower, as they are paid by the ton, so growers run a frequent dilemma between quality of fruit versus profit. Charlie's philosophy and dedication to quality are slowly starting to permeate a number of Lodi growers and shift the wine community's long held prejudice against Lodi Zinfandel. Yet, even with his 'beautiful crop' of Zinfandel, Charlie had never tasted a wine made exclusively from his own vineyard. It appeared that was not going to happen with his fruit locked into contracts with big production wineries... not until he met Carol Shelton in early 2011.

**“As long as I enjoy growing grapes, which I do,  
I’m going to keep at it.” -Charlie Piazza**

***When the stars align and the wine gods smile mischievously...***

Charlie and his son-in-law, Austin, started attending ZAP events and meeting Zinfandel producers. If anyone could appreciate the quality of Zinfandel coming from his vineyard, it would be a winemaker that has built their reputation on making outstanding Zins. With this in mind, Charlie approached Carol at a wine dinner in Bodega Bay in 2011. “Why don’t you make a Lodi Zin?” Charlie asked her. He handed her his business card and waited to hear from her.

It turns out that was a loaded question. Carol recalls “when Charlie asked me why I don’t make Lodi Zin, all I could think was: Ugh, I don’t like Lodi Zins. Too sweet, too much alcohol and they taste like raisiny, cooked fruit.” But Charlie talked her into taking 2 tons, about one acre’s worth of fruit, and she decided to experiment with it. Carol insisted they pick the fruit at a lower sugar level, 24.5 Brix, to avoid the loathed “stewed fruit” quality. From there she barreled the Zinfandel in different types and toasts of barrels to discover which best suited the wine. After months of ageing the barrels in the cellar, Carol invited Charlie and his family to come taste the different barrels. “She involved us in what she was doing. We got to see what a good winemaker can do with our fruit,” says Charlie’s son-in-law, Austin. Carol and Charlie were both impressed with the different barrels, and the next harvest, 2012, Carol took 10 tons. This would become the first vintage of Pizzaz Zin, the first wine made exclusively from Piazza Vineyard’s Old Vine Zinfandel.

***Charlie and the Zen of Carol Shelton Zinfandel***

After decades of perseverance and hard work, Charlie finally has a wine that is as meticulously hand-crafted as he keeps his vineyard. Carol Shelton is known for her unpretentious style and dedication to each vineyard site’s unique terroir. The result is a catalog of wines that represent the range of what Zinfandel can do in California. Lodi Old Vine Zinfandel now has a converted fan in Carol. As Charlie says, “Carol is taking these grapes and making them in her style, and that’s why they stand out.” Without a doubt, we can look forward to more spectacular vintages of Pizzaz Zin as Charlie and Carol develop the elegant synchrony between the vine and the wine.



Piazza Family (left to right): Cindy & Charlie Piazza, Katie (formerly Piazza) and Austin Lesley & Ava .



Charlie Piazza & Belle (in back)

## THE LODI APPELLATION

Grapes have grown wild in Lodi as far back as human memory. Fur trappers in the area called one stream “Wine Creek” because of the scope of wild vines along what would later be called the Calaveras River in southern Lodi. Vineyards were producing fruit and homemade wines in 1850 and by 1858 El Pinal Winery was established as the first commercial winery. Although grain & watermelons were the bigger business for Lodi farmers, vineyards persisted. During Prohibition, from 1919 to 1933, most of the grapes grown in Lodi were sent to the East Coast in rail cars for home winemakers, enabling farmers to maintain their vineyards while commercial winemaking was illegal. Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, the demand for grapes went *up* during Prohibition; likely, because wine was no longer readily available to buy, more people started making wine at home.

Zinfandel has been a part of the vineyard landscape in Lodi since the first commercial winery was established. This diverse varietal flourished both then and now in Lodi. In fact, Lodi has been dubbed the “Zinfandel Capital of the World”, and since they produce over 40% of California’s Zinfandel, they appear to have a valid claim. Today, there are about 80 wineries, and over 100,000 acres of grapes planted. The region is known for its Old Vine Zinfandels, and as a winemaker famous for her Zins, Carol is happy to have found a vineyard that grows high quality fruit and expresses the unique character that is Lodi.