

The Underdog Advantage

story and photos by Randy Caparoso

The primary occupational focus for most of the 14,000 or so citizens of Ripon, California, is agriculture—particularly almonds, which the locals charmingly call “am’ns.” Right behind nuts, however, are wine grapes, and one of the quiet forces behind this industry is the McManis family.

Now sold in every U.S. state, the wines of McManis Family Vineyards still tend to sneak up on some consumers: While the family has farmed in the San Joaquin Valley since 1938, their winery wasn’t founded until 1998 (its products officially entered the market in 2001). While the winery’s production capacity is substantial—about 7.8 million gallons, or roughly 3.2 million cases, per year—McManis Family Vineyards currently just churns out more than 150,000 cases annually.

The “secret” behind the McManis family’s success is hardly concealed. Their impressive estate-grown vineyards, which number 3,600 acres

of premium grapes spanning from Clarksburg and Lodi to the River Junction AVA, yield 11 distinct offerings with an average retail price of \$11. “As stories about the American dream go, ours is probably of the underdog who had the audacity to open up a winery and expect to succeed in such a competitive industry,” says fifth-generation grower Justin McManis (the son of founders Ron and Jamie McManis, he also serves as the business’ Vintner & Supply Chain Coordinator).

According to Mike Robustelli, McManis Family Vineyards’ Winemaker since 1999, “only about a seventh of the wine produced from [the winery’s] vineyards goes into McManis label wines,” with the remainder “sold to other wineries on the West Coast and in other states.”

“This will remain the core of the family’s business” in future years, Robustelli says, with the advantage of this business plan being that the company can pick

and choose the highest-quality lots at its own discretion. “Every wine is treated as if it’s going into a McManis wine, and decisions about what goes into our own bottles are made afterward,” Justin says. “Besides quality, the obvious advantage is we have been able to increase our production precisely as much as the market can accept.”

While McManis Family Vineyards’ portfolio is currently more than 90 percent estate-grown, Justin says their goal is to reach 100 percent “as [their] newest vineyards come online.” All McManis Family properties are currently certified by the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing, the area’s leading sustainable viticulture program, with additional certifications awarded by the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA).

“Because we’re looking out for the next generation—and for the seventh, the eighth, and the ninth—we started getting our vineyards certified sus-

The McManis Family Sierra Loma Vineyard in Northern California.





The McManis family: Winemaker Justin McManis, Vintner & Supply Chain Coordinator; Stefanie McManis; Lincoln McManis; Dirk Heuvel, Vineyard Manager; Tanya McManis Heuvel, Office Administration; Kody McManis; Ron McManis, President and co-owner; Jamie McManis, Vice President and co-owner; and Kaci McManis.

tainable in 2013–2014,” Justin explains. “In 2016, we earned the California Green Medal at the CSWA’s Sustainable Winegrowing Leadership Awards.”

In a related rebranding campaign, McManis Family Vineyards recently unveiled a redesigned label that clearly designates each wine as “Certified Sustainable.” A “Certified Green” Lodi Rules seal, meanwhile, appears on each back label.

“By this time next year, just about all our bottlings will carry one of the seven appellations in which we farm: River Junction, Lodi, Borden Ranch-Lodi, Clements Hills-Lodi, Jahant-Lodi, Mokelumne River-Lodi, or Clarksburg,” Justin says. “Our Barbera will continue to be California-appellated since it comes from our Jamie Lynn Vineyard right in front of the winery here in Ripon,” which is not part of an AVA. ■



A SAMPLING OF MCMANIS FAMILY VINEYARDS WINES

McManis Family Vineyards 2017 Pinot Grigio (\$12) Fragrant flower and citrus notes with suggestions of honeyed pear; lemony-dry, pure, and light on the palate, it finishes with a lip-smacking stoniness. According to Winemaker Mike Robustelli, “future vintages will carry a River Junction appellation.” “Our 400-acre River Junction Vineyard is the only vineyard in River Junction [an AVA since 2001], which lies in a lower river bottom consisting of sandy loam. Temperatures are a good 5 degrees lower than surrounding areas,” he adds.



McManis Family Vineyards 2017 Estate Grown Pinot Noir (\$12) The exuberantly pure fruit style of this variety is immediately apparent. Strawberry accompanies loamy and sweet tea-like undertones with a soft, round, supple, and medium-bodied feel. “The industry says you can’t grow Pinot Noir in Lodi, but the region’s Mediterranean climate says different,” Robustelli says. “It is also a culmination of the family’s viticultural standards, particularly in our Creekside Vineyard [a 250-acre Jahant-Lodi planting in gravelly-clay San Joaquin Series soil] and our Sierra Loma Vineyard in Borden Ranch AVA [650 acres on rolling hills of rocky, red-clay Redding Series soil].”



McManis Family Vineyards 2017 Jamie Lynn Vineyard Barbera (\$12) This gives everything you’d want in a California-grown Barbera: It’s beautifully bright with a clear cherry/raspberry perfume; zesty, medium-full body with piercing acidity; and buoyant, fluid fruit unencumbered by excess oak or tannin. Sourced from the family’s smallest vineyard (2 acres), it’s available nationwide at a fantastic price.



McManis Family Vineyards 2017 Petite Sirah (\$12) With a vivid, opaque hue, this wine is unabashedly intense. On the heels of a lush blueberry/boysenberry nose with smoky and spicy nuances, a plethora of fruit gushes through the sturdy yet well-rounded body. “Twenty percent of this wine is blended with Tannat and smaller portions of Teroldego and Alicante Bouschet,” Robustelli says. “It’s crafted for Petite Sirah lovers, but it’s also been a Best of Show finalist at the California State Fair and has made best-buy lists in national magazines every year since 2013.”



McManis Family Vineyards 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$12) Pretty aromas of raspberry and cassis with black-tea and cedar-box embellishments; fairly easy yet firmly dry, the medium-full body features loamy, earthy notes underlining the mid-palate. “Small amounts of Petit Verdot, Tannat, and Teroldego enhance this varietal,” Robustelli says. “Most of the fruit came from the family’s Liberty Vineyard [225 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon in Lodi’s rocky Borden Ranch AVA] as well as the Lone Oak Vineyard [320 acres in Lodi’s Clements Hills].”

