

Man with a Mission

SOMMELIER-TURNED-WINEMAKER **PATRICK CAPPIELLO**
FINDS A HOME IN LODI

Sometimes we wander so far off the beaten path we can't go back; instead we have to forge a new one. That's what happened to Patrick Cappiello, who left a perfectly good 25-year career as a sommelier in New York City to become a winemaker and the owner of his own successful California brand, Monte Rio Cellars.

Cappiello shrewdly chose to undertake his new calling by studying under Pax Wines' Pax Mahle, a talented winemaker with a 20-year track record and a personal philosophy to which Cappiello felt, in his words, "a kismet connection." Adds Cappiello, "I never looked back."

The challenge, of course, was to



Old-vine Mission grapes.

by the wines of the Lodi region—particularly Somers Vineyard, which is planted to old Mission vines well over 6 feet tall that yield soft, light wines transparent in both color and the type of flowery perfume common to almost all Lodi-grown reds. "Mission is a historic grape. It also made me think of what the old wines of California from the 1800s and early 1900s might have been like," Cappiello says, harkening to a time when everything was fermented with natural yeasts, sulfur was barely used, and a five-year-old barrel was considered "new." Monte Rio Cellars also eschews the use of new oak, aging its wines strictly in neutral oak after employing whole-cluster fermentation with native yeast.

Since 2019, the Monte Rio Cellars portfolio has grown rapidly. Cappiello relishes, for instance, producing his River's Edge Sangiovese: an homage to light, zingy, old-school Chianti, complete with straw-covered fiasco-shaped bottle, from biodynamically farmed Sangiovese grown in a riverside Lodi vineyard. He also produces varietal Zinfandel, Primitivo, and Petite Sirah in his signature lower-ABV, acid-driven style—one that's totally contrarian, at least by commercial industry standards.

Cappiello calls the Monte Rio Cellars 2021 Teresi Vineyard Red—a 50/50 blend of Zinfandel and Petite Sirah from a single Lodi vineyard farmed according to regenerative organic principles—his finest wine of all, mostly because it captures a sense of place in the same way that Lard des Choix Rouge speaks of Ardèche. In that sense, it fulfills the ideals Cappiello has long harbored as a wine professional. A wandering sommelier has found a home! 



Monte Rio Cellars founder Patrick Cappiello in Lodi's Somers Vineyard.

Cappiello counts working under David Gordon at Tribeca Grill and Tim Kopec at Veritas as highlights of his restaurant career, during which he garnered several notable accolades: *Food & Wine's* "Sommelier of the Year" and *Imbibe's* "Wine Person of the Year" in 2014 as well as the Eater Awards' "Sommelier of the Year" title in 2015. And then a door slammed shut when the Michelin-starred Rebelle, where he was serving as operating partner and wine director, closed in 2017—prompting Cappiello, in his words, "to flee to California."

carve a niche in an industry where talented winemakers practically grow on trees. "The only thing I knew I wanted to do," says Cappiello, "was to make a difference by producing something that [would have] the soul of the Old World and overdeliver on value." As a sommelier, one of Cappiello's favorite wines was Les Champs Libres Lard des Choix Rouge, a maverick Rhône-style blend grown in France's Ardèche region; while he knew he could never fully recreate it with Californian terroir, he found that he was similarly inspired