

upfront

by Randy Caparoso

Oak Ridge Winery general manager Raquel Maggio-Casity with her sisters and partners, hospitality manager Lisa Kammerer and brand ambassador Shelly Maggio Woltkamp.

A photograph of three women walking through a vineyard. The woman in the center is older with short white hair, wearing a white lace-trimmed blouse and blue jeans. She is laughing. The woman on the left is younger with blonde hair, wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants. The woman on the right is also younger with blonde hair, wearing a white button-down shirt and distressed jeans. They are all smiling and walking on a dirt path between rows of grapevines.

Giving Voice to the **GRAPES**

OAK RIDGE WINERY MAKES A PLAY FOR THE PREMIUM-TIER MARKET

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any of the farming families in California's Lodi appellation have been there for over 100 years. The Maggio family is no exception, having emigrated from Genoa, Italy, in 1906. Like many Lodi growers, the Maggios profited immensely during Prohibition, when home winemakers across the country created a sudden demand for wine grapes; today, they own and farm over 2,500 acres, all but 250 of them located within the AVA (the balance falls in the California Delta region just west of the appellation). Intent on preserving their properties for future generations, they are certified by LODI RULES for Sustainable Winegrowing, which sets a high bar with respect to environmental responsibility.



In addition to the partners, Oak Ridge's winemaking, marketing, and sales teams are majority women.

Twenty years ago, Rudy Maggio, the family's third-generation patriarch, led the Maggios into the winemaking business by establishing Oak Ridge Winery. The original idea was to capitalize on their wealth of land and surplus of grapes by producing value-priced labels such as OZV, Old Soul, Maggio, Three Girls, and Blazon that would sell in retail stores from coast to coast for as low as \$11.

Rudy, however, has recently eased into retirement, making way for a fourth generation: Oak Ridge general manager Raquel Maggio-Casity and her sisters and partners, hospitality manager Lisa Kammerer and brand ambassador Shelly Maggio Woltkamp. Says Maggio-Casity, "We are proud to be women-owned. It's no coincidence that we have a new woman winemaker, our assistant winemakers are women, and our marketing and sales teams are majority women." And together, they have made no bones about what they plan to do: raise the quality of their wines to sell in the \$22-\$35 range.

The siblings feel strongly that their grapes have always possessed the requisite qualities for premium production, so "the major focus has been in the winery," Maggio-Casity explains. "We made huge improvements just over the past three years, investing in more and better barrels and adding new tanks and equipment, including a Pellenc optical sorter. . . . We are still working out



The label on the inaugural vintage of Maggio Estates Cabernet Sauvignon tells the family's story.



PHOTO COURTESY OF OAK RIDGE WINERY



1906 Vintners 2021 Fumé Blanc, Lodi (\$22) Fermented in steel and aged in French and American oak (70%), this DTC-only Sauvignon Blanc offers fragrances of citrus (lime peel) and tropical fruit (mango) with a sliver of vanillin oak enhancing the fruit-focused profile. Tart, tight, delicate qualities show on the palate. In chief winemaker Laura Chadwell's words, "Sauvignon Blanc grows beautifully in Lodi, which you can sense in this wine. . . . The fruit is very bright and citrusy but not overripe. . . . It is filled with orange blossom-like floral notes, a grapefruit-like citrus character, and a hint of nectarine rather than being only about tropical fruit."



Maggio Estates 2020 Chardonnay, Lodi (\$30) Light straw-gold in the glass; fresh, bright apple and pear aromas with an intriguing trace of leafy herbiness; fine, silky, creamy entry leading to a pinpoint balance between crisp fruit, a touch of toasty oak, and citrusy acidity. Explains Chadwell, "The fruit is sourced from the Maggios' Mokelumne River and Jahant AVA vineyards [in] the cooler parts of Lodi, so the natural acids show very well. This is not a 'copycat' Chardonnay. It is a selection of our best barrels, the ones we felt were truest to the terroir. Stylistically, we went for [a] more delicate [wine] with crisper acidity, avoiding a fat or buttery oak feel—the predominant profile remains that bright citrus/green apple Chardonnay character, which allows for a little floral/jasmine character to come through."



Maggio Estates 2020 Cabernet Sauvignon, Lodi (\$30) Purplish-ruby hue. Intensely fruit-forward nose—plums, mixed berries—underlined by low-key hints of cedar/pencil wood as well as leafy/herbal green notes. On the palate, notable acidity and medium tannins bolster the fruit tones, framed by a touch of toasty oak. Chadwell elaborates: "This is an almost 100% Cabernet Sauvignon with 2% Merlot blended in, aged in French (73%) and American oak. In future vintages we plan to move to 100% French oak. Similar to our Chardonnay program, we selected our best barrels, which came from our best vineyards on the cooler western side of the Lodi appellation. The climate in this area is moderate enough that we get the concentrated blackberry varietal character [with neither] a super-green pyrazine herbaceousness nor any overripe, raisiny, or jammy characteristics. The wine ends up very much a Lodi style of Cabernet Sauvignon. It has structure and weight but is also very fruit forward; when Lodi fruit is allowed to express itself without interference, you get a very supple style of the varietal, with enough intensity to define itself as a luxury-tier Cabernet."

the bugs, since this is an old facility, originally built in 1934 [as an old growers' cooperative, but] . . . we are very serious about being competitive in the premium market."

That goal has also entailed bringing in bright new talent, which perfectly describes chief winemaker Laura Chadwell. Chadwell is a University of California, Davis, graduate in viticulture and enology who actually grew up in the Lodi area but has honed her skills over the past ten years in Paso Robles, Monterey County, and Napa Valley.

Chadwell's outlook is typical of many winemakers today in that she is planning, with the blessing of the Maggios, to steer the winery away from strictly commercial varietal bottlings toward wines that highlight terroir, specifically that of Lodi. "When I had the chance to return to the old Zinfandel vines that stole my heart nearly ten years ago, I jumped," says Chadwell. "I love to make wines that speak for themselves—wines that decide what they will be, where I'm just lending a helping hand."

The current releases in Oak Ridge Winery's premium portfolio do indeed speak for themselves, though we have something to say about them too—see above for tasting notes. 

PHOTO: DAVID HAMMOND BROWN



Oak Ridge assistant winemaker Lorena Hernandez Barron, chief winemaker Laura Chadwell, and assistant winemaker Sasha Hazel.