

full hearts,  
**STRONG ROOTS**

A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY THROUGH LODI'S  
OAK FARM VINEYARDS



story by Jessie Birschbach / photos by Kat Murillo



**Y**ou wouldn't be surprised to learn that there are a handful of majestic oak trees on the Oak Farm Vineyards estate in Lodi. Perhaps the most striking is the one that seems to frame the tasting room from the gated entrance, but for co-owner and Winemaker Dan Panella, it's a tree you can't see that matters most. "It fell about three years ago," he told me on my recent visit to the estate. "I got married underneath that tree. It was 400-plus years old. I was sad to see it go."

**Because the Oak Farm Vineyards winery rests on a 100-year flood plain (and because of an additional height request from her father-in-law Bob Panella), co-owner Heather Panella was tasked with sitting the winery and tasting room 4 feet above the vines—an ambitious undertaking ultimately worth the view.**

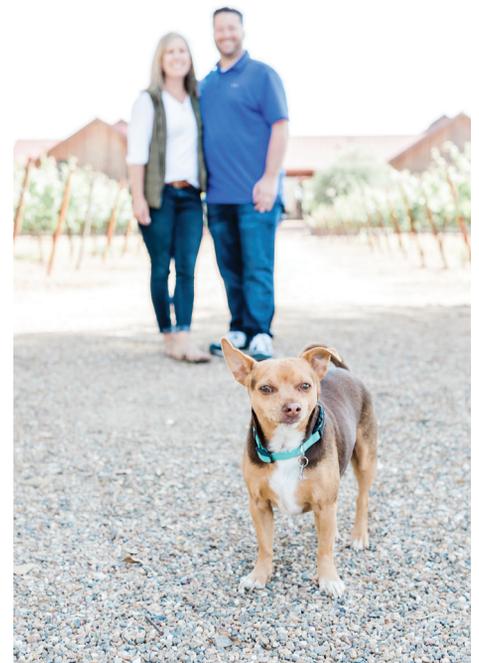


**A landscape designer by trade, Heather Panella considered every detail while designing the grounds surrounding the tasting room.**

We walked to its remnants, a formidable trunk about 4 feet in diameter, slowly drying in the sun. Dan wasn't sure what the trunk would become, but he could tell me with certainty that this was the tree that's now featured on the winery's label. "The guy that originally settled here in 1860 called this property Oak Farm," Dan explained. "He loved oak trees so much that he left as many as he could and planted others. He grew wheat and raised cattle, so the trees provided shade. I know there are a few wineries with the word 'oak' on the label, but we kept the name out of respect for him."

Leaving the mighty fallen oak, we walked along a row of Cabernet Sauvignon vines to a small enclosed graveyard. There rested the original settler, William DeVries, his wife Cornelia, and a few other family members. All their headstones had been cobbled back together from rubble. "There was no fencing," said Dan, "and the markers had been trampled over by cattle. Once we bought this property from the previous owners, we pieced them all together again."

Between two rows of Chardonnay (both the leaner Dijon clone) we encountered Ted Dawson, Oak Farm's utility man; an American history buff, he also leads historical tours on the property. Armed with a disheveled white binder, he pointed out that the two unmarked graves, now neatly outlined in rock, were found via ground-penetrating radar thanks to the efforts of Dan and his wife-partner Heather Panella. "I'm pretty darn grateful for the stewardship that these two have taken with the property,"



**Bernie, the precocious star of Oak Farm Vineyards.**

Heather and Dan Panella reside in a historic mansion built in 1876, surrounded today by Oak Farm's vineyards, with their dog Bernie as well as their four children.



said Dawson. His binder was not only filled with the DeVries' family history and the occasional Lodi-based artifact (like the first ZinFest poster) but also the story of the Panellas.

### Farmers and Drivers

Dan Panella is a third-generation Lodi farmer; his grandfather Raphael (aka Ralph) Panella immigrated to the area in 1933. One of the pages in Dawson's binder features a black-and-white photo of Ralph standing next to a newly purchased 1934 Chevy flatbed filled with sugar beets he'd grown himself. As much as Ralph preferred farming, this Chevy would become the first vehicle in his fleet of agricultural trucks, providing a vital service in the Lodi area.

Ralph's son Robert (Bob), much less a farmer than his father, would later advance the trucking side of the business and even expand into building race cars. Ralph's walnut orchard remained in the family all the while, however, and eventually a young Dan Panella would grow up playing there, even helping his neighbors prune their vineyards from time to time.

In 2004, faced with having to replant most of the walnut trees, the Panellas instead sold the land and parlayed

the money into buying the Oak Farm property. At first, Dan commuted to Lodi from Stockton to oversee his newly acquired vineyards, but as he admitted to me, once he moved onto the premises he "quickly realized it's not that fun to grow grapes for a large-scale winery—especially when you put all this love and effort into the grapes, only to see them fed into a giant tank, never knowing what they will become. That would just hurt my heart . . . We also felt it's just so beautiful here, and a winery would be wonderful to share with people."

Dan and I walked along the edge of a lake peppered with honking Canadian geese, through a garden of bright pink peonies skirting the edge of a chicken coop. We took a quick peek at the large 19th-century horse barn (the interior dripping in warm white lights, set up for wedding receptions), passed an old grain scale and a tiny saddle house, and finally ended up in a simple white building with a big wooden bar. When Oak Farm Vineyards officially opened in 2010, producing wine off site, "this was our pilot tasting room," said Dan. "But it would be packed in here, and that helped us grow into this today."

### The Green and Multifarious Vines

The Panellas sustainably cultivate 60 acres of vines representing 14 predominantly Mediterranean and Bordeaux grape varieties, inspired naturally by Dan's French and Italian heritage. (They've also recently purchased 10 more acres as part of a larger parcel about a mile and a half east of the estate—but that's another story.)

Their red grapes include Cabernet Sauvignon, Primitivo, Barbera, Zinfandel, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot, Grenache, Merlot, Sangiovese, and Syrah, supplemented by four whites: Fiano, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Albariño. All are planted in blocks about 3–4 acres in size. "Why so many?" asked Dan. "We wanted to have blenders—lots of spices in our spice rack. We're always experimenting with small parcels, tearing up and replanting if something doesn't work."

The day was warm, but a substantial breeze kept us cool enough to continue our walk around the vineyard without breaking a sweat. Dan squinted in the sun. "Around noon it seems like someone just flips on a giant fan and starts blowing a gentle breeze our way," he said. "That's that San Francisco Bay influence. We're 90 miles directly inland and we've got pretty huge diurnal shifts here too. If it's 85 degrees during the day, it's going to be in the 50s at night."



In 1933, Raphael Panella emigrated from Avellino, Italy, and purchased a 1934 Chevy flatbed (much like the one pictured here) to bring his harvests to market.



**Oak Farm Vineyards maintains 70 acres of vines, sustainably growing 14 different grape varieties.**

around and play hide and seek in here, not to mention that those chemicals are expensive,” said Dan. “We’d rather just keep on top of things with shoot thinning and cluster thinning, riding that fine line of keeping the vines in balance. Doing so usually makes them more resistant to problems.”

### The Elevated Winery

With the addition of the new winery and tasting room, Oak Farm Vineyards produced its first estate vintage in 2014. Falling in line with Lodi Rules, Dan along with Assistant Winemaker Sierra Zeiter and Consulting Winemaker Chad Joseph refrain from using any caustic chemicals, employing steam and hot-water pressure washing for sanitation purposes. As Joseph told me, “All the wastewater we generate goes back into our vineyard. It’s all handpicked, hand-harvested, hand-sorted, and then destemmed. We don’t actually crush anything—we destem and keep most of the berries whole. It’s a gentler process.” The winemaking team also uses closed-top fermenters exclusively, “keeping everything topped up to minimize oxidation and spoilage issues,” said Dan. “It’s a closed-loop system.”

With a total annual production of about 25,000 cases, the Panellas will soon add a larger barrel room to keep every facet of the winemaking process on site. Heather, a landscape designer by trade, supposes that “we’re going to have to take out some vines and place it on the other side of this crush pad, but it’ll be worth it to have that control.”

Positioned with my back to the tasting room in the outdoor seating area, I looked around, taking in Heather’s comprehensive landscape design. To my left, past a large fireplace, was a lush garden. In front of me, the vineyard was framed through a square corridor. To my right were more vineyards and the old home- stead—all bordered by the infinity edge of a nearby reflection pool. What a view.

By honoring the history and the terroir of this little slice of Lodi heaven, the Panellas have optimized their ability to make some of the best wine the area has to offer. Some might call them sentimental for their efforts—but nobody would mistake them for fools. ■■

Kicking up a bit of nutrient-rich sandy loam, Dan explained that one key to vineyard management for him is deficit irrigation, “so we’re not giving the vine everything it needs all the time.” But perhaps the biggest concerns the Panellas’ dedication to sustainability. They’re incredibly sensitive to keeping dangerous chemicals out of their vineyards, which are certified sustainable by Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing—particularly because their home on the estate, a historical mansion built in 1876, is surrounded by vines. “The kids run



## Tasting highlights

### OF OAK FARM VINEYARDS’ CURRENT RELEASES

*Available in California via Epic Wine & Spirits and in 17 other states through a variety of distributors; visit oakfarmvineyards.com for the full list. The wholesale prices are listed below.*

#### **Oak Farm 2018 Sauvignon Blanc, Lodi (\$17)**

Refreshing white grapefruit, lime, freshly cut grass, and an interesting lemongrass note. Despite its relatively full body, it manages to remain crisp and taut.

#### **Oak Farms 2018 Albariño, Lodi (\$17)**

Pretty and floral. Honeysuckle, green apple, and even a bit of white raspberry widen on the palate, then tighten up with pithy lime before finishing in river-rock minerality. Likely my favorite white wine in the Oak Farm Vineyards lineup.

#### **Oak Farm 2018 Fiano, Lodi (\$19)**

Ripe apricot, honeydew, lemon zest, and chalky minerality show in one of the more unusual varietal whites to come out of Lodi. Dan’s family is from Avellino in Campania, an Italian region well known for its Fiano; his use of the grape is a tribute to his heritage.

#### **Oak Farm 2017 Zinfandel, Lodi (\$24)**

Rich, briary fruit includes boysenberry pie drizzled in smoky caramel, with a smattering of dried purple flowers. A bit of gravel comes through at the end of this full-bodied, formidable Lodi Zinfandel.



#### **Oak Farm 2018 Tievoli Red Blend, Lodi (\$22)**

A rich blend consisting of 73% Zinfandel, 18% Barbera, and 9% Petite Sirah. Mixed ripe berries, including blueberry and raspberry, join plum and dark-roasted coffee bean before the graphite finish.