

Pioneering winegrower Jerry Lohr stands in front of the Home Ranch vineyard, which serves as the source of the Petite Sirah in J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines' new proprietary red wine: J. Lohr Pure Paso™.

Pure INNOVATION

PIONEERING J. LOHR VINEYARDS & WINES DEBUTS ITS FIRST PROPRIETARY RED WINE

*story by Michelle Ball
photos by Jeremy Ball*

It was the early 1970s when Jerry Lohr, a civil engineer in the Bay Area and a former NASA research scientist, planted the first grapes for J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines in an unproven viticultural region on California's Central Coast. Having grown up on a farm in South Dakota, Lohr was captivated by the wine industry, as it allowed for complete control of all aspects of the business—from farming the grapes to making the wine.

In contrast to most early beginnings, the Stanford graduate formed a business plan for a winery with an annual production of 125,000 cases and an initial goal of being 80% estate-grown. "The reason



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—Jerry Lohr

I wanted to be at a reasonable level was so I could bring in the best barrels, the best winemakers, the best vineyards, the best technology, the best marketing, and so forth,” explains Lohr, who at 82 still fires off dates and facts from his past as if they happened yesterday.

When it came time to plant, Lohr wanted to look beyond Napa and Sonoma, which were already on the verge of tremendous growth. “I thought, OK, what can I learn from those places, but more importantly, where else can I go?” recalls Lohr. The desire to forge a new path and improve beyond the status quo led Lohr to cultivate vineyards in Monterey County, whose coastal proximity was ideal for retaining natural acidity. A little over a decade later, Lohr expanded to Paso Robles to add Bordeaux varieties to his portfolio.

This year marks the 45th anniversary of J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines, and a constant drive to improve, a commitment to being estate-grown and -bottled, and a dedication to its people remain integral to the winery’s success. The longevity of the latter mission is evident from the lengthy tenures of employees throughout the company, among them Brenden Wood, who was recently promoted to red wine-maker after 15 years with J. Lohr.

“Always Willing to Invest”

After graduating from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, with a degree in biochemistry, Wood traveled through France and Italy to glean valuable winemaking experience. Joining J. Lohr in 2004, he began as a lab technician and worked his way up to enologist, then assistant winemaker; now, in his new role, he’s overseeing the entire portfolio of red wines at the company’s Paso Robles winery.

As a scientist, he says he values J. Lohr’s commitment to continually increasing quality through research and testing. “I could see early on that they were always willing to invest in improvements to make the wines better,” adds Wood, who explains that one of his initial projects was focused on promoting phenolic development. J. Lohr was one of the first producers to closely examine how pigmentation is derived from tannins, a practice that helps guide winemaking decisions to achieve Lohr’s stylistic goals: plushy, soft tannic character and intense color. “We’ve seen a steady growth [in phenolics] over the last 15 vintages, so the wines keep getting darker each year. That’s easy to do—what’s hard to do is to keep tannins soft,” says Wood. “We’ve actually seen our wines

J. Lohr 2017 Pure Paso™, Paso Robles (\$27) Opaque with a fuchsia rim, this wine features aromas of warm blackberry pie that punch through the glass. Under a veil of savory mint and subtle notes of lavender, spicy tannins lead to generous black fruit and whispers of sage and graphite. There is so much pleasure in this wine, yet there’s still a cerebral quality that begs for further discovery.



get denser over time, but also softer. Softer in this case relates to that skin ratio of color and tannin.”

J. Lohr Pure Paso Debuts

That trademark flavor profile is evident in the winery’s latest release, the J. Lohr Pure Paso Proprietary Red Wine, which Lohr describes as “an opportunity for our winemakers to make an ultimate red blend.”

The very first J. Lohr wine was a 1974 Petite Sirah, which was also one of the first varieties planted by Lohr and his team in Paso Robles. It flourished in the region’s warm, arid climate, and the winery continues to annually produce a popular Tower Road Petite Sirah under its Vineyard Series tier: “What we always want to do is completely control our own grapes. It’s estate fruit made by us, barreled by us, blended by us, and bottled by us,” Lohr explains.

With J. Lohr Pure Paso, Petite Sirah takes on a different role, making up nearly 30% of the final blend. Mild fermentation temperatures and

a shorter maceration time give the variety a fresh blackberry profile and a soft tannin structure. Cabernet Sauvignon serves as the backbone (70%), seeing the addition of small amounts of Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Malbec for complexity.

For this particular wine, Wood focuses on Cabernet Sauvignon from the Shotwell Vineyard in the El Pomar District. This site sits directly in the path of the Templeton Gap—a series of passes in the coastal mountains. This geological feature allows maritime air currents to flow, moderating afternoon heat and heightening the aforementioned savory red fruit and herbal characteristics in the Cabernet grapes. On the nose, the Petite Sirah leads with opulent and fresh blackberry while the Cabernet frames the palate with greater restraint, cassis, and subtle minty notes: an interplay Wood describes as a “yin-yang,” considering how the two varieties both contrast with and complement each other. *SJ*

The view from Shotwell Vineyard, which is located in the El Pomar District sub-AVA of Paso Robles. The cool breezes from the nearby Templeton Gap contribute to the development of savory, herbal flavors, making the site an ideal source for the Cabernet Sauvignon blended into J. Lohr’s Pure Paso wine.



A FRESH LOOK FOR THE J. LOHR VINEYARD SERIES

In 1986, J. Lohr planted its first vines in Paso Robles at the Home Ranch in what was to become the Paso Robles Estrella District sub-appellation. Fast-forward to today, when the winery now farms over 2,600 acres of vines spanning five of Paso Robles’ sub-AVAs. Around 20 years ago, J. Lohr launched its Vineyard Series portfolio, highlighting the character and profiles of single-vineyard estates throughout Monterey and Paso Robles; now the series includes the J. Lohr Hilltop



Cabernet Sauvignon, named for a vineyard located on the Home Ranch. The J. Lohr Tower Road Petite Sirah completes the tier’s Paso Robles offerings, while Monterey and the Arroyo Seco AVA’s cooler climate contribute the series’ J. Lohr Arroyo Vista and October Night Chardonnays, the Fog’s Reach and Highlands’ Bench Pinot Noirs, and a Late Harvest Riesling. J. Lohr’s lone Napa Valley property in St. Helena is the source of the J. Lohr Carol’s Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon.

Since its inception, the J. Lohr Vineyard Series wines have benefited from the company’s constant viticultural investment and innovation. Tighter spacing, advancements in farming techniques, new irrigation protocols, and experience with choosing better-suited rootstocks and clones are all instrumental in improving fruit quality.

With such significant advancements in the vineyard over the past 20 years, a refresh in packaging for the Vineyard Series tier seemed appropriate. The new look was thoughtfully crafted in collaboration with highly regarded firm CF Napa Brand Design not only to communicate the series’ focus on place but also to better differentiate it visually from the J. Lohr Estates tier. In addition, a conscious effort was made to preserve elements from the original design so as to retain familiarity among buyers. Keep an eye out for the brand-new Vineyard Series label beginning with the release of the 2017 J. Lohr Hilltop Cabernet Sauvignon this fall.