

Growing Into the Estate

M2 Wines goes from warehouse to modern winery in Lodi, Calif.

By Andrew Adams



RANDY CAPAROSO

The new M2 Wines winery tasting room features white polycarbonate walls that can be rolled open when weather permits.

Inspiration is derived from wine in many different ways.

For Layne Montgomery, founding winemaker of M2 Wines, one of the wines that first stoked his passion for winemaking was undistinguished, yet still proved to be revelatory for someone who knew little about wine.

“My first glass of wine I ever had: I was 19 years old, in college, and it was pink Catawba,” Montgomery recalled while tasting through a few barrels in the barrel room of his new winery, located north of Lodi, Calif. “No offense to them but... you know (I was) born and raised Southern Baptist. Momma don’t dance; daddy don’t rock and roll, and my sister still thinks I’m going to hell for making the devil’s Kool-Aid. But I knew there was enough hype in the world about wine that there had to be better s*** than this.”

That ordinary wine sparked an intellectual curiosity in Montgomery that compelled him to go on and try thousands of wines. After college Montgomery, whose voice carries a slight drawl from growing up in Missouri and Arkansas, worked in television production in Arkansas, Colorado and Arizona for 15 years before spending seven years in marketing in the Sacramento, Calif., area while maintaining a steadfast pursuit of gaining wine knowledge.

In 1983, while still living in the Midwest, he flew out to Napa, Calif., by himself to visit wineries and taste. While at home he made regular trips to the Brown

Derby in Springfield, Mo., to find new wines. “I never even considered getting into the wine business; but you know, now I can’t imagine doing anything else,” he said.

Montgomery first started making wine around 1999. A 5-gallon carboy of wine was soon followed by a barrel, then three barrels, which soon grew to more than seven.

He settled in the Lodi area to be near affordable grapes, and he and his original partner (whose last name also began with an “M,” hence the name M2) produced their first vintage of 750 cases at a custom-crush location in 2004.

The following year they leased an empty warehouse in an industrial area on the eastern edge of Lodi and set up shop as a winery. Montgomery bolstered his skills with classes at the University of California, Davis, and after a few years he bought out his original partner.

Montgomery says he has an intense passion for winemaking, and that narrow focus almost cost him the company. In 2008, brothers Terry and Ted Woodruff and Steve Stiles bought partner stakes in the winery and kept it afloat. Both Woodruff brothers play an active role in the winery, and Terry Woodruff is the CEO. Assistant winemaker Mark Sanford is also a member of the board of directors, as is partner Brian Pickard.

“I was just obsessed with making wine. I didn’t pay attention too much to the other part, and they came in and took

control of the financial situation and got everything going correctly,” Montgomery said.

By 2013, the winery had built a strong base of support through its 800-member wine club, good direct-to-consumer sales and a distribution agreement to send almost a third of the winery’s production to Asia.

M2 Wines is now making around 4,000 cases per year. Future growth and winemaking operations were cramped by the tiny warehouse space that also didn’t offer many amenities for folks doing wine tasting.

Highlights

- The new M2 Wines winery is designed to accommodate future growth through direct-to-consumer sales and a simple yet efficient winemaking area.
- A modern tasting room is surrounded by oversize doors that can be opened to provide a tasting experience in a planned estate vineyard.
- Winemaker Layne Montgomery works with several Lodi, Calif., area growers to craft fruit-forward yet balanced wines.

After looking for property for some time, Montgomery found fallow farmland on which he could build an estate winery. The winery was designed by John Vierra, who grew up in Lodi and is the son of Vernon Vierra, the winemaker and owner of nearby St. Jorge Winery.

"I wanted a tasting room experience that was indoor/outdoor in the middle of a vineyard kind of thing," Montgomery



Winemaker and founder Layne Montgomery.

said. "And I was thinking in the line of 12-foot ceilings and mall doors, but he came up with this, which I think is pretty spectacular."

Indoor/outdoor tasting room

The tasting room is surrounded on three sides by 20-foot by 20-foot metal-framed doors that are made of polycarbonate. When the weather is mild the doors can be opened all day, offering views of the planned vineyards and Sierra Nevada mountains far off on the horizon. "The polycarbonate is translucent and lets light in during the day without artificial lighting," Vierra said. "The effect produces a uniform defused glow into the interior. At night the opposite occurs, becoming a beacon of light. LED multicolored lighting is incorporated, allowing M2 the ability to change color and relate it to a specific mood or event."

Local firm Delta Buildings was the general contractor for the project. The winery is built on a metal frame that was fabricated by CBC Steel Buildings in Lathrop, Calif.

Vierra said the winery is clad in metal-insulated panels made of weathering steel that will rust to a certain depth and stop. "That layer hardens and serves as a protec-



tive layer that is maintenance free," he said. "The rustic cladding relates with the surrounding vineyard by picking up the rusted steel trellis supporting the vineyard."

In late February, when *Wines & Vines* paid the winery a visit, M2 had been in its new home for about six weeks. The modern winery stood in stark contrast to the unplanted fields surrounding it. Mont-



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RANDY CAPAROSO

About 75% of M2 Wines production is sold direct to consumer through the tasting room or to wine club members.

gomery said he plans to plant a couple of acres of Albariño and then the rest to Zinfandel.

At the new winery, grapes follow a straight path from the crush pad through to the tasting room on the opposite end of the building. “The idea here is you receive the grapes, you ferment the grapes, you age the grapes, you sell and

taste and sit on the patio and enjoy—all in one linear direction.”

All of Montgomery’s picks are done by hand, with the grapes typically showing up in the early or late morning following a night harvest. He said in Lodi it can sometimes be a logistical challenge to get 4 to 5 tons picked on the same day the grower is scheduling an 80-ton harvest.

Clean picks, ‘intense field sorting’

Yet Montgomery has stuck with his growers because he appreciates their commitment to quality fruit. “What I’ve been very fortunate with is I’ve been using these same growers for years, and they have as much pride in their grapes as I do in the wine. I generally get very clean picks, very intense field sorting.”

For Zinfandel in particular Montgomery said he might pick 3 tons and leave one on the ground both because the grape is notorious for uneven ripening and to ensure top quality.

Picks typically occur at around 26° to 27° Brix. M2 Wines are fruit-forward, unabashed Lodi Zins and red blends, and Montgomery is not shy about his style. He says he’s well aware that Lodi wines are branded as too alcoholic and too fruity.


“I’m very sensitive to the criticism that Lodi is big alcohol plonk,” he says.

Montgomery says he hits the right balance by working with growers on sun exposure, pulling green fruit and knowing just when to pick. He described his wines as exhibiting a modern interpretation of Lodi’s rustic winemaking roots. “I’m not always known for elegance or subtlety, but that’s OK.”

On the crush pad, Montgomery drops fruit through a custom-built hopper by Liberty Industrial into a Lugana 1R crusher destemmer from AWS Prospero. The must is then collected back in bins for fermentation or sent to stainless steel tanks with a Waukesha 130 pump from Carlsen & Associates.

M2 has one bank of 1,500-gallon Criveller Group tanks. Montgomery said he picked up two of the tanks for a bargain when a Napa Valley winery switched to concrete, and he’s been very happy with them. Each is equipped with its own cap irrigator beneath the top hatch; so when Montgomery is doing pump overs, all he needs to do is move his pump from tank to tank. The pump is a Zambelli T-180 from Napa Fermentation Supplies.

In the cellar, Montgomery said he likes



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The crush pad and receiving area leads to the main fermentation room.

conducting small-lot fermentations to achieve better control. He said he wants his wines to exhibit brambly, *savage* fruit with good color and complex aromatics. “It comes from the vineyard, and we’re just maximizing what’s there by correct fermentation. Don’t burn out the flavors with too much heat: Let everything develop with the proper nitrogen,” he said.

Fermentation is conducted with a mix of Lallemend and Laffort yeasts from Scott Laboratories. “I like fermenting in 5-ton lots; it’s easier to control, I think, and I can have two tanks of Zinfandel and use two types of yeasts and end up with more complexity—at least I like to think so.”

Once fermentation is complete, Montgomery presses each lot with a Bucher Vaslin XPR08. Each tank typically requires three press cycles, and Montgomery admits it’s definitely time for a new

press—although he’s been very happy with the press, calling it a real “work horse.” The limited capacity of his press means Montgomery needs to take white grapes to St. Jorge Winery to press there, and then haul the juice back to his winery for fermentation.

Montgomery has been making a dry Viognier since 2008. He ferments the juice cold in stainless steel to ensure the wine has a crisp, clean finish. “I started off doing a partial-barrel ferment and tank ferment, and it wasn’t crispy clean like I wanted—and of course it wasn’t, it was in neutral French oak. I just like the racy crispness of this,” Montgomery said of his current-release Viognier.

To inhibit malolactic fermentation in his whites, Montgomery treats the juice with Lysozyme from Scott Labs. He inoculates his reds for MLF with VP41, also from Scott Labs.

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Each of the 1,500-gallon Criveller Group tanks is equipped with a built-in irrigator for pump overs.

M2 Wines

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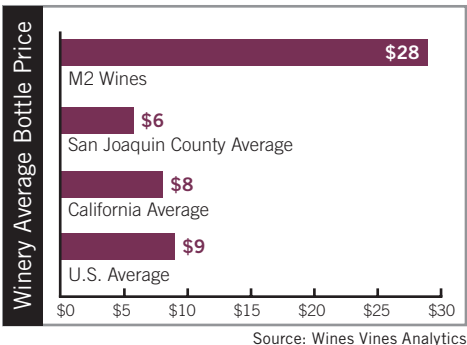
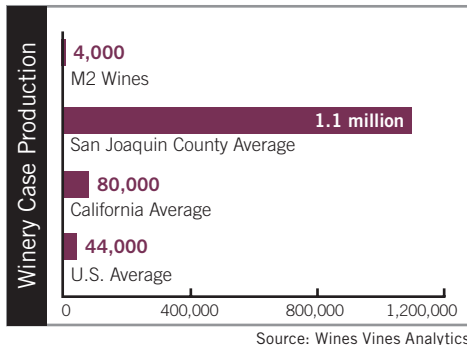
Layne Montgomery

MAJOR PARTNERS

Ted Woodruff,
Terry Woodruff,
Steve Stiles

WINERY AVA

Lodi



THE CHALLENGE

Through strong direct-to-consumer sales and a key distribution account in Asia, M2 Wines had outgrown its small industrial space east of Lodi, Calif. Founder and winemaker Layne Montgomery envisioned an open-air tasting room experience in an estate vineyard and turned to a local designer to make it happen.

Building the Winery

General contractor	John Vierra, Delta Buildings , deltabldgs.com
Excavation	Greyson Engineering , (209) 368-5440
Interior design	John Vierra, Delta Buildings , deltabldgs.com
Winery refrigeration	GD-27H, G&D Chillers , gdchillers.com; Design/install Contractor: Eric Bold, Foothills Mechanical Inc. , (530) 391-2078
Plumbing/hot water	GRB Plumbing , (209) 333-7760
Metal building	CBC Steel Buildings , cbcsteelbuildings.com
Floors, trench drains	JSG Concrete , (209) 745-5903
Epoxy resin flooring	Protech Coatings , pro-techcoating.com; Cabebe Construction , (209) 321-7777

Packaging

Bottles	Demptos Glass , demptos.com
Corks	MA Silva USA , masilva.com
Label design	Wallrich Creative Communications , wallrich.us
Label printing	Label Art of California , labelartca.com; Monvera Glass Décor , monvera.com
Capsules	ACI Cork USA , acicorkusa.com

Winery Services

Lab Analysis	Lodi Wine Laboratory , lodiwinelaboratory.com; Scott Laboratories , scottlab.com
Case goods storage	Elite Wine Shipping (EWS) , elitewineshipping.com
Distribution	Representative in Southern California: Dimaggio Washington , worldwineeducation.com, (310) 720-5401; Export to Hong Kong/China: Mr. Sze Ming, Oriental Pearl (HK) Ltd.
Web sales/POS/inventory software	VinNOW by Update Software , vinnow.com
DtC/wine shipments	Via Elite Wine Shipping (EWS) , elitewineshipping.com

Making the Wine

Hopper	Custom built, Larry Kost, Liberty Industrial , kosts.com
Destemmer	Lugana 1R, AWS/Prospero , prosperocorp.biz
Must pump	Waukesha 130, Carlsen & Associates , carlsenassociates.com
Flexible impeller	Zambelli T-180, Napa Fermentation Supplies , napafermentation.com
Tanks	Four 1,500-gallon/5-ton red wine fermentors, Criveller California Corp. , criveller.com
Barrels	Demptos Napa Cooperage , demptosusa.com; Canton Cooperage , cantoncooperage.com; Seguin Moreau Napa Cooperage , seguinmoreaunapa.com; Nadale USA , nadalie.com; Francois Freres, Mel Knox Barrel Broker , knoxbarrels.com; Tonnellerie de Jarnac , tonnellerie-de-jarnac-16.com; Mistral Barrels , mistralbarrels.com
Barrel racks	Western Square Industries , westernsquare.com
Bottling line	Mobile Wine Line , (209) 745-287
Yeast	BM45, D254, L2056, D80, RP15, RHONE 4600, BRL97, Clos, Lallemand , lallemandwine.com; Laffort USA , laffortusa.com; Scott Laboratories , scottlab.com
Malolactic bacteria	VP41, Scott Laboratories , scottlab.com
Nutrients, enzymes other additions	GoFerm, GoFerm Protect, Fermaid O, Fermaid K, Scottzyme ColorPro, Lysovin (Lysozyme), Scott Laboratories , scottlab.com
Press	Bucher Vaslin XPRO8; KLR Machines, now Bucher Vaslin North America , bvnorthamerica.com
Filter	Pall Corp., Scott Laboratories , scottlab.com
Barrel washing	Gamajet HD-BB, Gamajet , gamajet.com

(Continued from page 54)

A larger press and more fermentation tanks are some of the next additions for the winery. "We're just doing this one step at a time, trying to pay cash for it as we go," he said.

Preference for American oak

For most of his red wines, Montgomery said he prefers to use American oak. "I think French oak and Zinfandel go together like lipstick on John Wayne," he said.

Although he does age his Syrah in Francois Frères and other French barrels, almost everything else is American.

"This Canton is one of my favorite cooperages," he said of the Canton Co-



The M2 Zinfandels age in 100% American oak.

perage American oak barrels. "That's one of my favorite barrels for Zinfandel."

Other coopers Montgomery uses include Nadalie USA, Seguin Moreau, Tonnellerie de Jarnac, Mistral Barrels and Demptos Napa Cooperage. He said he particularly likes the Demptos hybrid barrel made with both American and French oak. The new winery features space for 500 barrels and is kept at around 60° F with good humidity to limit evaporative loss.

After barrel aging he filters with a Pall sterile filter and bottles with Mobile Wine Line out of nearby Galt, Calif.

The winery is equipped with a professional catering kitchen and will feature a private tasting area overlooking the barrel room in the near future. A breezeway between the production area and tasting room will provide space for parties and quarterly wine dinners, but Montgomery said he has no plans to make the winery an event space. "I just want to focus everything on making wine and selling wine," he said. "I just don't have any desire to get into the wedding or concert business."

As M2 Wines has grown, so too has Lodi's reputation as a wine country destination. Montgomery said he remembers opening his tasting room on the week-



ends, when he started M2 Wines, and on a slow day he'd get one group of visitors. "But when we'd ask them, 'What brings you to Lodi?' they'd say, 'Well, we're here for our grandmother's funeral.'"

Now the visitors to M2 Wines' tasting room are coming specifically for the wine, and many are coming from out of state.

Montgomery wants to grow production to between 5,000 and 7,000 cases and continue to build his tasting room and wine club sales. "The whole point of this place is DtC," Montgomery said of the new winery.

With a modern tasting room that's bigger than his original winery, M2 Wines now has a home to support that growth. **W&V**

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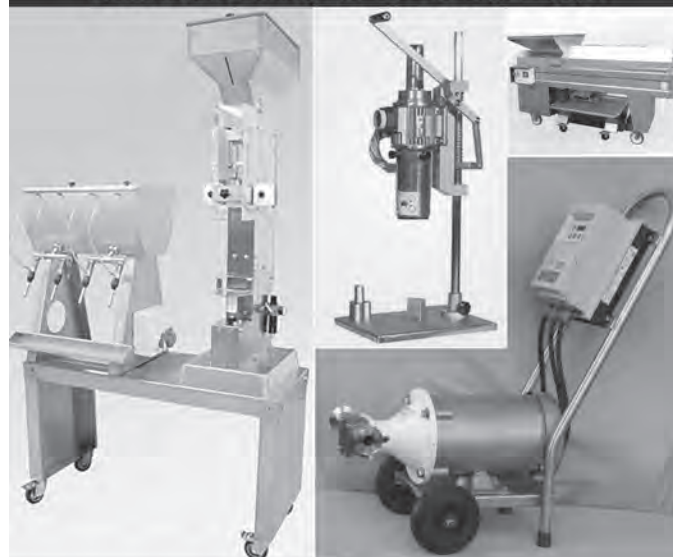
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