

How a small rural California road became the latest wine battleground in Napa Valley

By Jess Lander

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A few miles north of downtown St. Helena, the narrow Lodi Lane connects Napa Valley's main thoroughfares, Highway 29 and Silverado Trail. Just three-quarters of a mile long, the oak-and-vineyard-dotted road features a rusting, one-lane truss bridge over the Napa River that's prone to flooding. (A bright-yellow traffic sign reads, "If flooded, turn around, don't drown.") It's not uncommon to find a tractor plodding down the patchwork pavement.

Now, some Lodi Lane residents fear a pair of development proposals will jeopardize their coveted pastoral lifestyle. So they're taking on two of the most powerful entities in California wine: the publicly traded Duckhorn Portfolio and Jackson Family Wines, which owns more than 25 wine brands in the state.

"It's a pretty daunting fight," said John Murphy, a Lodi Lane resident since 2013, who also operates a vineyard on his property. Lodi Lane is home to fewer than a dozen residences, including several multimillion-dollar estates set behind gates and manicured gardens. Murphy has assembled a small group of neighbors under the moniker Preserve Lodi Lane in an attempt to stop the industrialization of their country road.

First up: the expansion of Duckhorn, one of Napa Valley's most renowned wineries, at the east end of Lodi Lane. The proposal includes an increase of over 50,000 annual visitors and a new 58,000-square-foot production facility. Residents also oppose a 79-room hotel called the Inn at the Abbey, which Jackson Family Wines plans to build next to the historic Freemark Abbey Winery at the road's west end.

Preserve Lodi Lane has voiced concerns related to traffic, safety, water usage, the environment, construction, noise and, above all, the impact on the scenic nature of their home.

"It's good grape growing land that's going to other purposes," said Kathy Pagendarm, whose home on Lodi Lane shares a property line with Duckhorn. The land has been in her husband's family for four generations. "We live in an agricultural preserve, and it's not going to be an agricultural preserve if it keeps getting developed this way."

These David-and-Goliath battles between locals and the wine industry have become common in Napa Valley. New vineyard and winery proposals are consistently met with fierce opposition, and increasingly, residents are winning. Outcry from local and environmental groups has successfully influenced Napa County's termination of controversial development projects like Le Colline Vineyards and Mountain Peak Winery. Those with the ambition to plant a vineyard or build a new winery risk years of conflict that could cost millions of dollars — and in the end, their proposal could be denied.

The tension on Lodi Lane may be headed into another drawn-out fight. Murphy spent \$2,000 to personally appeal the Duckhorn expansion. It hangs in limbo until an appeal hearing before the

Napa County Board of Supervisors, tentatively scheduled for July 23. (The nonprofit Water Audit California also filed an appeal, citing concerns over impacts to the Napa River.)

Traffic is Preserve Lodi Lane's main worry. Residents claim traffic has already escalated in recent years as many wineries surrounding it — including Charles Krug, Markham Vineyards, Trincherro Family Estates and Ehlers Estate — have undergone renovations and increased the number of visitors they see each year. In 2016, Brasswood opened a massive campus featuring a winery, bakery, restaurant and events space. The hip and moody Faust Haus opened in 2020 to instant fanfare. While all of these developments have disrupted the rustic environment of Lodi Lane to some extent, residents say the proposals from Duckhorn and Jackson Family will have a greater and more direct impact.

Duckhorn's 2021 traffic analysis, which relied on data collected in 2019, projects an increase of approximately 79 daily trips per weekday, totaling well over 20,000 additional cars a year. Still, the winery's proposal classified this as a "less than significant" impact on traffic. After reviewing it, Napa County agreed.

The Inn at the Abbey's 2019 traffic analysis, based on 2017 data, estimates an increase of 366 more trips per day on average, rising to 128,000 more annually. But that number is still within the existing permissions of the property, said Kristen Reitzell, Jackson Family Wines senior vice president of communications. The large site has been home to various commercial businesses, including a brewery, art gallery, motel and multiple restaurants, but most of the buildings have sat vacant or been underutilized for several years. The company is also proposing "traffic calming measures," like a pedestrian traffic crossing, said Reitzell.

Preserve Lodi Lane feels that the data used for each traffic study is out of date. The group wants Napa County to require both companies to fund a new study, one that analyzes the cumulative impacts of these two projects. "It's a very narrow section of the valley," said Pagendarm. "The road is not suited for this kind of development."

While a Napa County rule requires that traffic studies are performed within two years of an application, that requirement has been waived for several projects, according to Napa County Director of Public Works Steven Lederer. "It would have resulted in studies being done while traffic was artificially low during the COVID pandemic," he said. "The most conservative route was to use pre-COVID data."

Last fall, Murphy hosted a meeting at his home between Lodi Lane residents and Duckhorn President Alex Ryan, who has since retired, to discuss the expansion. But the neighbors didn't feel like their concerns were heard. In an attempt to reiterate their position, some homeowners, including Murphy, purchased Duckhorn stock. They sent letters to the board of directors; Murphy said they haven't heard from Duckhorn since.

Duckhorn, however, issued a modified proposal to the county in March. This included a 10% reduction in annual visitor traffic and in the size of the winery facility. "Over the past eight years, we have pursued this project in a manner that is mindful of the environment, in accordance with all county ordinances and respectful of our community — including numerous consultations with our neighbors," said Zach Rasmuson, Duckhorn Portfolio's executive vice president and chief operating officer.

The Inn at the Abbey is still in the planning stages, but Reitzell claims that while “some opposition is expected,” Jackson Family Wines has “mostly received positive feedback and support from neighbors.” The company is preparing an environmental impact report, and once that’s complete, the county will begin its review. Brian Bordona, Napa County’s Planning, Building and Environmental Services director, said he expects the proposal will come before the Planning Commission this year.

Still, neighbors fear these developments will destroy one of the last rural roads that embodies what locals refer to as “Old Napa,” a simpler time before resorts, Michelin-starred restaurants and hundreds of wineries infiltrated the region.

“Every time they build another industrial site, it takes away from the inherent aesthetics of the valley,” said Murphy. “It’s part of the mystique for people to come up here.”

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