

*Planted in 2002, Beck Vineyard's high-stress Block 2 produces exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon for J. Lohr's luxury-class Signature release.*

# CRAFTING

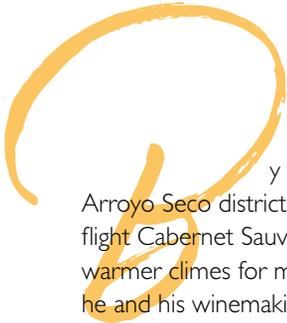
# Quality

## DEFINING THREE TIERS OF OFFERINGS FROM THE J. LOHR CABERNET PORTFOLIO

by Michelle Ball / photos by Jeremy Ball



*Red Wines Winemaker Steve Peck has been with J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines since 2007.*



y the early 1980s, J. Lohr's cool-climate vineyards in Monterey's Arroyo Seco district were firmly established. Jerry Lohr was anxious to add top-flight Cabernet Sauvignon to his growing portfolio and knew he needed to look to warmer climes for more Bordeaux-like conditions. In his quest for a new location, he and his winemaking team tasted hundreds of Cabernet Sauvignon samples from throughout California.

Lohr preferred the dominant fruit character and softer tannins found in the Cabernets from Paso Robles, so a decade after he first entertained expanding beyond Arroyo Seco, he planted his first vineyard there in 1987—directly next door to one of the properties whose wines he most enjoyed. Fast-forward to 2018, with J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines now farming more than 2,300 acres throughout Paso Robles with Cabernet Sauvignon as its primary focus. The company's properties span six sub-appellations in the region, enabling it to integrate flavors from a broad palette of fruit profiles while taking advantage of its extensive portfolio of estate-grown vineyards and history of long-term grower relationships.

J. Lohr produces three tiers of Cabernet Sauvignon: the Estates **Seven Oaks**, its entry-level wine that makes up the majority of its production; **Hilltop**, from its Vineyard Series, which originally began as a single-property offering and has since expanded to include a selection of multiple sites; and **Signature**, a very-limited release personally overseen by Jerry Lohr which focuses on the best lots in any given vintage.

## Plush Fruit and Supple Tannins

Crafted to be drinkable upon release, all three tiers of J. Lohr Cabernet share a profile of lush fruit and supple tannins thanks to a combination of farming techniques, fermentation management, and individual oak programs.

In the vineyard, controlling irrigation is key. Winter rains make up the foundation of the vines' water needs, with additional hydration provided as needed through June. By then, the canopies are healthy and there's a reasonable amount of moisture in the soil.

The winery then allows the vines to "dry down," avoiding irrigation as long as possible and closely monitoring the vines' stress levels all the while. "By doing that, we're preventing the production of possible vegetal pyrazines by restricting their formation in June and July so that we're not relying solely on hang time in October to burn them off," explains Steve Peck, Red Wines Winemaker for J. Lohr. This method encourages fresher fruit character with a lower alcohol content. "It's very intentional and part of the house style and flavor profile we're targeting," Peck adds.

In the winery, softer tannins are achieved in part through fermentation techniques. Peck says the aim is to get the temperature to 90 degrees Fahrenheit "early" before Brix drops below 20. This drives the extraction of anthocyanins from the skins, and once that's done, the winemaking team decreases the temperature and reduces the number of punch-downs/pump-overs. In doing so, they limit the extraction of tannins later in the fermentation process when alcohols are present.

With each year, they're conscious of tailoring the oak profile to suit the vintage. In 2015, for example, the region experienced a cooler May with a large amount of shatter and an uneven bloom. This led to berry variation and more savory tones, so to accent those characteristics, Peck selected a lower toast to better match the wines.

When describing J. Lohr's approach to each tier, Peck explains that the winery's "goals are the same, but the tools [it uses] to execute on them are a little different." And while all three wines share similar traits, they're each characterized by grape sourcing and cellar techniques. **Read on for a full breakdown of each of J. Lohr's Cabernet Sauvignon-based tiers:**



*The limestone-calcareous soils of Beck Vineyard.*

## SIGNATURE

J. Lohr introduced Signature, its first luxury-class Cabernet Sauvignon, just last year to honor Jerry Lohr's 80th birthday. The winemaking and viticulture teams collaborated to create this bottling, identifying three premier blocks as possible contenders and ultimately deciding on Cabernet from Beck Vineyard's Block 2.

Located in the Creston sub-appellation, the 115-acre vineyard is, according to Peck, best described as "a westside ranch on the eastside" due to its high level of limestone and calcareous soils resembling crushed white chalk. Block 2 sits at an elevation of 1,700 feet above sea level and is planted to clone 337 on 110R rootstock, a combination Peck calls "amazing," as it epitomizes the "tortured vine" to produce extremely low yields, tiny clusters, and exceptional quality. The high elevation, meanwhile, allows for early ripening, which results in crisper fruit flavors with improved acid retention.

The grapes are harvested by hand and berry-sorted before crush; at this stage, Peck uses the Pellenc Extractiv', an innovative piece of equipment that slingshots



**J. Lohr has been Beck Vineyard's exclusive fruit recipient since 2008 and purchased the property outright earlier this year. Vineyard Manager Zach Merkel now oversees this unique site.**

the tiny berries and essentially bursts them. To ensure the juice can benefit from the full potential of anthocyanins and tannins, Peck then performs a series of *délestage*, or rack and returns, early in the fermentation process to extract every drop of juice from the pulp. These techniques allow for better extraction overall but would be nearly impossible to implement on a large scale.

To ensure it's drinkable upon release, the wine is aged in 100 percent new French oak for 17 months and bottled for nearly two years. "In a way, it's a 'Hilltop Reserve' in that it's a superlative experience in the current release," Peck says. "It's also a wine that would certainly hold with age, but it's not a wine you have to cellar long-term to get the most out of it."



**J. Lohr 2014 Signature Cabernet Sauvignon (\$100)** Concentrated and juicy black fruit with notes of caraway and anise. The luxurious, supple mouthfeel builds into plush tannins for a richer attack on the finish. —Michelle Ball

## HILLTOP

The uplifted terraces and gravelly soils of the Hilltop Vineyard, which originally provided fruit for the Hilltop Cabernet, made for an exceptional wine. Yet with J. Lohr's vineyard acreage expanding throughout the region, Peck says the Hilltop Vineyard—located on J. Lohr's home ranch in the Estrella District AVA of Paso Robles—is not necessarily the winery's "best of the best" each vintage. "We began to see that we could make a better wine from some of the other sites that we had, including Beck," he adds.

Beginning with the 2007 vintage, Hilltop now features a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon from multiple "hilltop" vineyards grown at higher elevations. The 2015 Hilltop primarily consists of fruit from Beck Vineyard in the Creston District and Shotwell Vineyard in the El Pomar District AVA, although the Adelaide District's Gean Ranch has also been used in the past.

Specific vineyard blocks are slated as possible components for Hilltop, yet Peck says J. Lohr doesn't want to pass up new opportunities, either. After fermentation, Peck "barrels down" roughly 75,000 cases—nearly five times more than he needs—into French oak barrels, and over the next few months, the winemaking team tastes through each of the barrel lots to whittle it down to roughly 15,000 cases. "You already have to meet a really high threshold to be a part of those 75,000 cases, then we pull the best of the best to make the Hilltop blend," Peck says. The remaining wine is then added to the Seven Oaks Cabernet, thereby elevating the final blend of J. Lohr's popular, entry-level wine.



**J. Lohr 2015 Hilltop Cabernet Sauvignon (\$35)** Savory, brambly fruit with minty undertones that speak to the vintage. Dense mid-palate concentration with subtle, well-integrated oak characteristics. Aged in 75% new French oak for 18 months. —M.B.

**J. Lohr's Shotwell Vineyard in the El Pomar District AVA.**

*The view overlooking the original home ranch that surrounds the J. Lohr Winery in the Estrella District AVA. The ranch serves as a major source for J. Lohr's popular Seven Oaks release.*



### **J. Lohr's Lone Napa Valley Property Honors Jerry Lohr's Late Wife**

J. Lohr's Carol's Vineyard in Napa Valley's St. Helena AVA is named for Jerry Lohr's late wife, who died several years ago after a battle with breast cancer. To honor her legacy, the Lohr family has partnered with the National Breast Cancer Foundation for the past ten years, donating a portion of every bottle sold of Carol's Vineyard wines. This campaign, called Touching Lives, has to date helped fund more than 6,500 mammograms for women who couldn't otherwise afford them.

The Napa Valley location of Carol's Vineyard tends to produce a more robust expression of Cabernet with firmer tannins and a more angular structure than the winery's Paso Robles sites. Although Hilltop and Seven Oaks see small amounts of Petit Verdot and other Bordeaux blenders, Carol's Vineyard instead features a significant amount of Petit Verdot (21% for the 2014 vintage).

J. Lohr Red Wines Winemaker Steve Peck says he enjoys marrying Petit Verdot with Cabernet Sauvignon, as it allows for better oak integration while increasing the wine's blue-fruit character and acidity. "Petit Verdot opens up a window into that savory blend and really helps showcase the oak," Peck explains.

## **SEVEN OAKS**

Named for the original Seven Oaks Vineyard located near the winery, this wine is primarily composed of fruit from J. Lohr home ranch estate vineyards and satellite vineyards in the Paso Robles AVA. Roughly 60 percent of its grapes come from these sites, yet that amount continues to increase as J. Lohr expands its acreage.

Peck adds that the accessible, dense, and soft Seven Oaks Cabernet is a delicious everyday wine that's all about enjoyment. "I take an enormous amount of pride in Seven Oaks. This current vintage received 90 points and it's under \$20," he says excitedly.

Augmented by Peck's attention to detail in the cellar, J. Lohr's advantageous farming practices are further enhanced by its elaborate barrel program. The winery orders nearly 10,000 new American oak barrels annually for Seven Oaks—some from its "bread-and-butter" coopers and others from test lots.

In a way, Seven Oaks could be likened to a dish with layers of flavors crafted by an experienced chef. In this case, there's more than one cook in the kitchen: President/Director of Winemaking Jeff Meier and Assistant Winemaker Brenden Wood have worked alongside Peck for more a decade, tasting through innumerable barrel lots to perfect their oak program and create the final blend.

In part, this is exactly what sets J. Lohr apart: the experience and longevity of its team. "I've worked for many different wineries over the years—this one is really unique," says Senior Marketing Director Dave Muret. "Jerry is a true industry icon, but he constantly talks about his team. Everyone you meet here shares his and the family's long-term vision: a decades-long, vintage-to-vintage pursuit of quality."

**J. Lohr Seven Oaks Cabernet Sauvignon (\$17)** Crisp, plummy red fruit with subtle baking spice and soft tannins framed by fresh acidity. —M.B. SJ

