

Zinfandel

IN MY ARTICLE ON CHABLIS IN *QUINTESSENTIAL BARRINGTON* (July/August 2010), I wrote that it is the most misunderstood wine in the world and told why. For a different reason, I believe that Zinfandel is the second most misunderstood wine.

All Zinfandel comes from red grapes but much (most) of it is made into white or pink Zinfandel. This movement to the lighter and sweeter style of Zinfandel began in 1975 when Sutter Home began producing this style due to a “stuck” fermentation. For many people, this ‘blush’ Zinfandel was the first step down their wine journey. Essentially, it did and does for many Americans what lesser expensive sweeter style German Rieslings have done for the rest of the world. Although most people who become serious about wine leave these wines behind, I never forget that we all need something



or someone to get us started down our wine road.

In the case of Zinfandel, there is another reason why I am thankful for this sweeter version. By the early 1970s, Americans’ tastes had changed from classic red Zinfandels (which were generally not made as well as they are today) and many of the old-vine Zinfandel vineyards were being pulled out and planted with more fashionable varietals. If the revolution to white Zinfandel had not happened, we would have lost most of these precious, old vine plantings and would not have been able to have enjoyed them since.

For the remainder of this article, all Zinfandel comments will relate solely to the red Zinfandel bottlings. One of the reasons I like Zinfandel is that it can vary so much in flavors and intensity that it can be a versatile drink depending on the style. It grows well in several areas of California, including Napa, Sonoma and Amador Counties. For my tastes, I prefer Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma where many of California’s oldest vines grow back as far as 125 years, although the vineyards contain younger root stock as well. In almost all cases, these old vines are principally Zinfandel although some vineyards contain certain amounts of Mataro, Petite Syrah, Alicante Bouschet, Carignan and Grenache which had historically been included as a “field blend” even though the labels stated the contents as Zinfandel.

I have drunk Ridge Geyserville and Lytton Springs (formerly labeled Zinfandel) wines from every vintage beginning with 1968 and while there are other great producers, e.g. Ravenswood, A. Raffinelli and Seghesio, of note, none of their

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PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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top choices are as consistently good as the two Ridge wines are with food, for my tastes. The only problem is that they are the higher end of Zinfandel prices, i.e. \$35 and more important, are not commonly found. I recommend you buy them when you find them. Locally I buy them at Binny’s and Wine Discount Center. Ironically, they, as well as, the sublime Ridge Monte Bello Cabernet Sauvignon and Ridge Monte Bello Chardonnay are and have been made by my friend Paul Draper, who was raised on an 80-acre farm in Barrington. I know of no other person in the world who consistently makes wines at the top of more than one varietal pyramid, so I believe Paul is the world’s best winemaker (as do many others).

One of the best value Zinfandels I have found is the Kirkland Old Grandmere Vineyard from Lodi, made by Renwood. The 2007 and 2009, while not as good as my two favorites, come about as close as any other I have had and cost \$11-12. Unfortunately they are sold out and the 2010 will



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not arrive at Costco until early February 2013. An alternate wine is Director's Cut from Francis Ford Coppola for \$15.

In the *Quintessential Barrington* (September/October 2006) article on Exploring Great Barbecue Wines, I made the case for Zinfandel being the all-around best choice with barbecue and I still concur. However, the range of foods for these wines is very broad. It goes with most pork dishes (absent capers) and can be substituted for Chianti with many Italian dishes. Less robust styles make a great pairing with numerous chicken dishes, while more robust versions go well with lamb, beef and

wild game. In the United States where most wines are consumed within a few days, if not hours, of purchase, another great attribute of Zinfandel is that the tannins are usually relatively soft and lend themselves to early drinking. Even my great, perfectly balanced Ridge wines drink well from 4-10 years (Paul details all this on the back bottle label) but with decanting could be enjoyed even earlier. Contrast this with blockbuster Bordeaux and Syrah (especially from the Northern Rhone) which need at least a decade to be enjoyed and often improve for three to six decades. In a word, you can enjoy Zinfandels at their best within a short time

and even if you overlook one and it ages a bit, the worst is that the fruit lessens and it becomes more like Cabernet Sauvignon.

Closing with a bit of trivia, many people long believed that Zinfandel was America's indigenous grape. Sadly, it has been proven via DNA analysis that the grape originated in Croatia and is known as Crljenak Kaštelanski. But the story ends well, as almost every wine knowledgeable person agrees that the best Zinfandel comes from the United States. A Santé. U

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