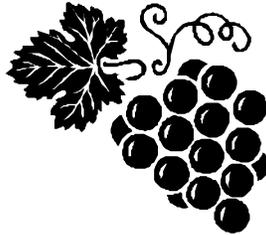

THE MYSTERIOUS ZINFANDEL



FOOD AND WINE AFFINITIES

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VERSATILE, EARTHY, ACCESSIBLE

I. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Unlike the more “noble” grapes of Europe, Zinfandel is truly “gypsy” in its development. Its origin is unclear, born somewhere in Europe, with humble, peasant beginnings. Some oenologists believe it is Italian in origin; others opine that it came from Hungary. But despite extensive research into its origins at the University of California at Davis, Zinfandel remains a mystery grape.

Similarly, its arrival to the U.S., and California in particular, also remains part of its mystery. There are many colorful accounts of its journey and development, but somehow Zinfandel became the principal grape in acreage in California, far surpassing even Cabernet Sauvignon. /1

Regardless of the mysterious past of Zinfandel, California is indisputedly the leader in Zinfandel production. More specifically, Sonoma County has emerged as the world’s capital of quality Zinfandels. Indeed, the winemaking and viticultural talents have been refined to such an extent that Zinfandels from particular areas have taken on unique characteristics. For instance, three areas in Sonoma are recognized as superior, yet distinct, in

quality: Dry Creek, Sonoma Valley and Alexander Valley. /2



II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VARIETAL

Because of its versatility, it is difficult to generalize as to a style of Zinfandel. In fact, there are eight styles of the wine, each met with varying degrees of success: White, Rosé, Nouveau, Early Maturing (Beaujolais-style), Late-Maturing (claret-style), Late-Picked (dry), Late-Harvest (sweet) and Port. Here is an overview.

The Lighter Varietals

White Zinfandel is the popular wine with varying degrees of residual sugar. It has less of the classic berry fruit of the grape and is best served cold. Zinfandel Rose is similar, with more of the color of the skins retained, because of either a full pressing, or partial fermentation. Zinfandel Nouveau is produced under carbonic maceration, in which fermentation occurs within the unbroken grapes. This brings out some of the additional fruitiness, but extracts less tannin and lower levels of tartaric acid, resulting in a soft wine, which should be

drunk very young (within a year). Also, its youth brings with it a high degree of yeastiness, which some may find excessive.

Also relatively young and light in body is Early Maturing or Beaujolais-style Zinfandel. This wine has intense berry fruit flavor of the grape, but is somewhat soft on the palate. It can last for several years, but may lose its freshness.

The Archetype of the Late-Maturing Style

The table wine most noted for its depth of flavor, body and ripeness is the Claret Late-Maturing style of Zinfandel. Claret is a British description of Bordeaux-style red wine. This is the style most warmly received by critics and restaurateurs. The grapes are picked when fully mature but not overripe. What results is a wine that stays true to its nature--sturdy, yet medium-bodied, "in your face" fruit with a balance of tannins and acids.

Zinfandel is noted for its depth of fruit. The first and dominant theme to the nose and palate is berries, specifically blackberries, though some of the lighter styles are more raspberry-dominated. The late-maturing Zinfandels also display a good deal of complexity and richness acquired from the grapes themselves, as well as from

the fermentation process (including malolactic fermentation), and oak aging. So there are often layers of berries and other fruits--hints of plums, raisins, and prunes--almost a jam quality to some of the fruit in the latter palate. In small quantities, this as a testament to its complexity, but too much is telltale of overripening. Yet this is also the hallmark of the dry Late-Picked style.

The Late Season Varietals

As it progresses to Late-Picked, it picks up a good peppery kick along the way. This is especially apparent in many of the Sonoma County Zin's. This gives Zinfandel some of its backbone along with its moderate tannin levels. Accordingly, Zinfandel in this style can take some short-term (less than 5-7 years) aging, and hold up its berry quality over time. Also, proper oak aging can give it some of the vanilla and spice characteristics of a Cabernet, without the tannin levels, and therefore, give the drinker a rounder mouth feel.

If Zinfandel grapes are allowed to truly over ripen, they acquire a jammy-raisiny quality, along with increased alcohol. These wines are difficult to pair with food and do not become mellower with age. The Late Harvest Zinfandel is similar to the dry

Late-Picked but contains up to 14 percent residual sugar.

Finally, the rarely talked-about Port style Zinfandel has met with some success as a dessert wine.



III. FOOD AFFINITIES OF THE VARIETAL

Given the somewhat humble beginnings, Zinfandel is perfectly suited for hearty, well-seasoned provincial dishes. As noted in The Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine, June 1995, "when it comes to generous, flavorful, abundantly fruited red wine whose enjoyment requires less sophistication than it does passion, nothing quite compares to Zinfandel. Finding a seemingly natural affinity with well-seasoned dishes, especially those involving tomatoes, garlic and olive oil, it is a wine whose unabashed fruit and richness make it an ideal partner to the heady cuisines we enjoy so often,"

What is so charming about Zinfandel is that though not definitively Provençal or "paesano" in its roots, it mimics the sturdy nature of Rhone and Italian wines in that it seems to be made for these cuisines. Certainly this is due in part to its matched

intensity in flavor and somewhat similarity in richness, but perhaps the grape comes with a "peasant" image that invokes a hearty, family-like characteristic.

Therefore, hearty meats work well with the wine, especially well peppered to highlight the peppery nature of the wine. Moreover, its body, texture, etc. hold up to heavily oiled, garlicky foods, and cut through the acid of tomatoes. Indeed, tomatoes and Zin are the ideal "classic" combination in any form, from pizza to ratatouille.

Interestingly, pork has also emerged as an ideal meat for Zinfandel, especially with the fruity "Beaujolais" style Zins. The fruitiness of the wine seems to enhance the inherent sweetness of the meat, and vice-versa. Moreover, pork is well suited for fruitier sauces, particularly berry and wine sauces. The berry nature of the wine provides for interesting culinary choices, especially when contrasted with the peppery undertones.

Examples of Zinfandel-friendly dishes include Pepper Tuna and Potato Napoleon, Chilled Blackberry Soup, Chilean Turbot and Wild Mushrooms, and Medallions of New Zealand Venison. 3



V. EXAMPLES OF RECENT HIGH QUALITY RELEASES

Following are several write-ups of Sonoma and Napa Zinfandels, primarily in the fruity, Late-maturing style, along with a few lighter

examples. (Taken from The Connoisseur's Guide to California Wine, June 1995.

1993 Gary Farrell Zinfandel, Russian River Valley, Collins Vineyard

“Very bright and deep in fruit, this pert wonderfully well-balanced bottling takes a different tack than the many alcoholic, highly-extracted Zins currently on the market. Its clean, raspberry-laden flavors run true to the fresh, mildly oaky aroma that preceded and the lingering finish is keyed on snappy fruit. Ideal with lighter pork entrees, it shows modest aging potential but will keep for several years.” ★★

1993 Hanna Winery Zinfandel, Sonoma County

“Lots of ripe, direct fruit guides the aromas with oak, hints of raisin and spice and a suggestion of cocoa, adding layers of interest. Medium-full to full-bodied in weight, the wine enters the mouth with attractive suppleness, and the round soft and fleshy fruit that follows is immediate and tasty. Moderate tannins in the latter palate and finish provide useful grip and will hold the wine in good stead for three to five years.” ★★

1992 Kenwood Vineyards Zinfandel, Sonoma Valley

“A tasty successor to Kenwood's ★★ 1991 Zinfandel, this directly fruity, berryish wine is given added richness by creamy oak and is very well-balanced while still showing both ripe and deep fruit. Its noticeable tannins firm up the latter palate while still letting the berry-like fruit hold on nicely in the finish. It will make a fine accompaniment even now to roast loins of pork brushed with honey, but has the stuffing and solid fruit to age for several years to come.” ★★

1993 Rabbit Ridge Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley

“Compact, fairly concentrated aromas display ripe blackberry scents enriched by oak and spice notes. Supple and medium-full-bodied, the wine shows an appealing palatal feel and good sense of weight and density. Its bright, concentrated blackberry and vanillin flavors continue into a lengthy finish, while evident tannins suggest that the wine will age well if we can ignore the appeal of its youthful fruitiness.” **

1993 Rosenblum Cellars Zinfandel, Mount Veader, Brandlin Ranch

“The biggest, broadest, most deeply fruited of the current Rosenblum offerings, this bottling is also the richest in oak. Creamy, vanillin scents frame those of ripe berries in the open, inviting aromas while succulent fruit flavors are enriched by abundant sweet oak. Solidly extracted and still just a little tight, it is most certain to expand with time and can be expected to improve for at least four to six years.” ***

1993 Scherrer Zinfandel, Alexander Valley, Old and Mature Vines

“Whether old or merely mature, the vines seemed to have done their work here to a ripe, character-loaded wine that is packed with juicy, near to jammy fruit. Simply oozing with concentrated blackberry qualities, this massive effort is full and chewy on the palate with so much substance as to make its finishing heat almost unnoticeable. Just tough enough to encourage cellaring, it should reach its best with a wait of three to five years” ***

Other Notables

(From The Wine Enthusiast, July/Aug. 1995, “The Zen of Zinoma.”)

1991 Dry Creek Vineyard Reserve, Sonoma County: “Big, peppery Zinfandel, powerful and direct.”

1992 Nalle, Dry Creek Valle: “Very well-balanced with supple, intense fruit and a long finish. Nalle continues to cruise out ahead of this style of Zin.”

1991 Preston, Dry Creek Valley: “Spicy fruit on the blackberry side with an engaging finish, capable of several years of aging.”



MODEL RECIPE

In keeping with its peasant image, here's a southern Italian style dish varied to highlight the peppery flavor of the Zinfandel. Steak Pizzaiola always involves use of olives, olive oil, garlic and tomatoes, so it mimics the richness and body of the wine. And the wine itself mellows the tomatoes so that the flavor rather than the acid shines through. The steak is peppered in an almost "au poivre" fashion and cooked with all the ingredients in the same pan to marry the flavors. The wine in the dish further reminds us of the pepper and connects with the wine in the glass. The steak holds up to the moderate tannins, mellowing any bite the wine may have in the finish.

The rest of the ingredients, crimini mushrooms, Italian peppers, provide both color and "atmosphere" to the dish. One can almost taste the hearty, "dolce vita" character of the wine in combination with the food.

Steak Pizzaiola

Ingredients:

Rib-eye Steak	1 1/2 doz. crimini mushrooms
Fresh cracked pepper	6-8 Italian peppers
Salt	5-8 Roma tomatoes
6 cloves garlic, rough chop	2/4 cup Late Maturing Zinfandel
2 large yellow onion, julienned	Fresh Italian parsley
1/4 cup chopped oil-cured olives	1/2 # linguine
2-3 T olive oil	Fresh ground pepper

Instructions:

1. Pepper steak until well covered. Sprinkle with salt.
2. Heat olive oil, sauté garlic and onions until soft.
3. Place steak in pan, Sear on both sides. Remove, leaving juices.
4. Add mushrooms, peppers, tomatoes, wine. Cook until peppers soften.
5. Meanwhile, cook linguine.
6. Return steak to pan, cook to desired temperature.
7. Slice steak and fan on plate.
8. Pile linguine onto plate, ladle vegetables with sauce onto steak and linguine. Sprinkle with pepper and garnish with parsley.

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University of California Press, 1984.

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FOOTNOTES

/1 Amerine, Maynard, etc. The Book of California Wine, pp. 224-228.

/2 Wine Enthusiast, July/Aug. 1994, “The Zen of Zenoma.”

/3 *Id.*

