



The Wines Flow in Dry Creek Valley

THE CALIFORNIA LOCALE AND SOME OF ITS GREAT RED ZINS

If any place sets the standard for Zinfandel—red Zinfandel—it's California's Dry Creek Valley. Situated in Sonoma County just northwest of the interesting wine town of Healdsburg, the valley is only 16 miles long and two miles wide but filled with vineyards.

Dry Creek Valley is a picturesque, rural area home to more than 70 wineries; it also provides grapes for other wineries outside the valley. All but a few of the valley's wineries are family-owned, which adds to the area's charm. More than 30 different grape varieties are grown, with Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon being especially successful, but the area is rightfully renowned for Zinfandel.

Zin was grown in Dry Creek Valley as early as the 1860s and quickly became the area's most planted grape. Despite setbacks such as phylloxera, a pest that decimated commercial grapevines late in the 19th century, and of course Prohibition, which took away the market for wines in the 1920s and early 1930s, grapes flourish in Dry Creek Valley.

Viticulture in the valley benefits from the combination of warm daytime temperatures ripening grapes and cool nighttime temperatures preventing over-ripening. This results in well-balanced wines exceptional for food pairings. Zinfandel does particularly well,

producing powerful, multidimensional wines with robust flavors and attractive mouthfeel. Most are fruit forward, but fruit doesn't overwhelm characters such as complexity.

Zinfandels are superb food wines. I love them with red-sauced Italian dishes and consider them ideal for pairing with American barbeque. Life is good when firing up the grill, slathering on sauce and pouring Zin from Dry Creek Valley.

I recently tasted an array of Dry Creek Zinfandels. Many proved impressive, a higher percentage than usual for my columns. Plus, their bang for the buck is very high. Here are my favorites across a range of prices.

DRY CREEK 2013 ZINFANDEL "HERITAGE VINES, SONOMA COUNTY" (\$20):

My winery contact, Northern Arizona University alumnus Bill Smart, reports that 70 percent of the grapes came from Dry Creek Valley. This excellent buy is a very good food wine, featuring rich fruit, moderate tannins, great character and fine integration. It's my top Zin for under \$30.

KOKOMO 2013 ZINFANDEL "DRY CREEK VALLEY" (\$28):

This impressive Zin's attack is fruit-focused, but mid-palate brings attractive complexity, excellent balance and smooth texture. All combine and carry through an extended finish. For an upgrade in quality (and price), consider Kokomo 2013 Zinfandel "Timber Crest Vineyard, Dry Creek Valley" (\$36). Both wines are available from www.kokomowines.com.

MAZZOCCO 2012 ZINFANDEL "WARM SPRINGS RANCH, DRY CREEK VALLEY" (\$34):

Mazzocco lists an unbelievable 24 different Zinfandels on its website, and this beauty tops my list of Zins for \$30-35. I loved its smooth texture, modest tannins, integration, complexity, balance and finish. What more is there? Available from www.mazzocco.com.

RIDGE 2012 ZINFANDEL BLEND "LYTTON SPRINGS, DRY CREEK VALLEY" (\$38):

Ridge is famous for its Zins, and this blend of 70 percent Zinfandel with Petite Sirah, Carignane and Mourvèdre shows why. It's a bit more tannic than most Zins recommended here, but is otherwise refined, exceedingly well integrated and long finishing.

MAZZOCCO 2012 ZINFANDEL "WEST DRY CREEK, DRY CREEK VALLEY" (\$38):

The highest-scoring wine in my tasting features great complexity on nose and palate, accompanied by rich, powerful fruit and superb balance and texture. Plus this beauty has a wonderfully full and lengthy finish. Available from www.mazzocco.com.

A. RAFANELLI 2013 ZINFANDEL "DRY CREEK VALLEY" (\$39):

For lovers of big Zins! Somewhat tannic, this youngster needs to accompany beef or be cellared for a bit. I loved its power and complexity, both of which carry throughout its impressive finish. Available from www.arafanelliwinery.com.

SEGHESSIO 2012 ZINFANDEL "CORTINA, DRY CREEK VALLEY" (\$40):

Seghessio produces several wonderful Zins, but only the Cortina is from Dry Creek Valley. This fine wine is very full-bodied, impressively complex, brimming with personality and a favorite of mine with milk chocolate. The 2011 vintage is currently available in Arizona.

PAPAPIETRO 2011 ZINFANDEL "DRY CREEK VALLEY" (\$42):

As much as I enjoy big Zins, I loved this more refined wine with its modest tannins, graceful texture and beautiful balance between fruit and crisp acidity. A superb food wine. Available from www.papapietro-perry.com. ▲

Recommended wines can be ordered from your favorite Arizona wine store, except as noted. Write to John Vankat at azpinewine@yahoo.com.