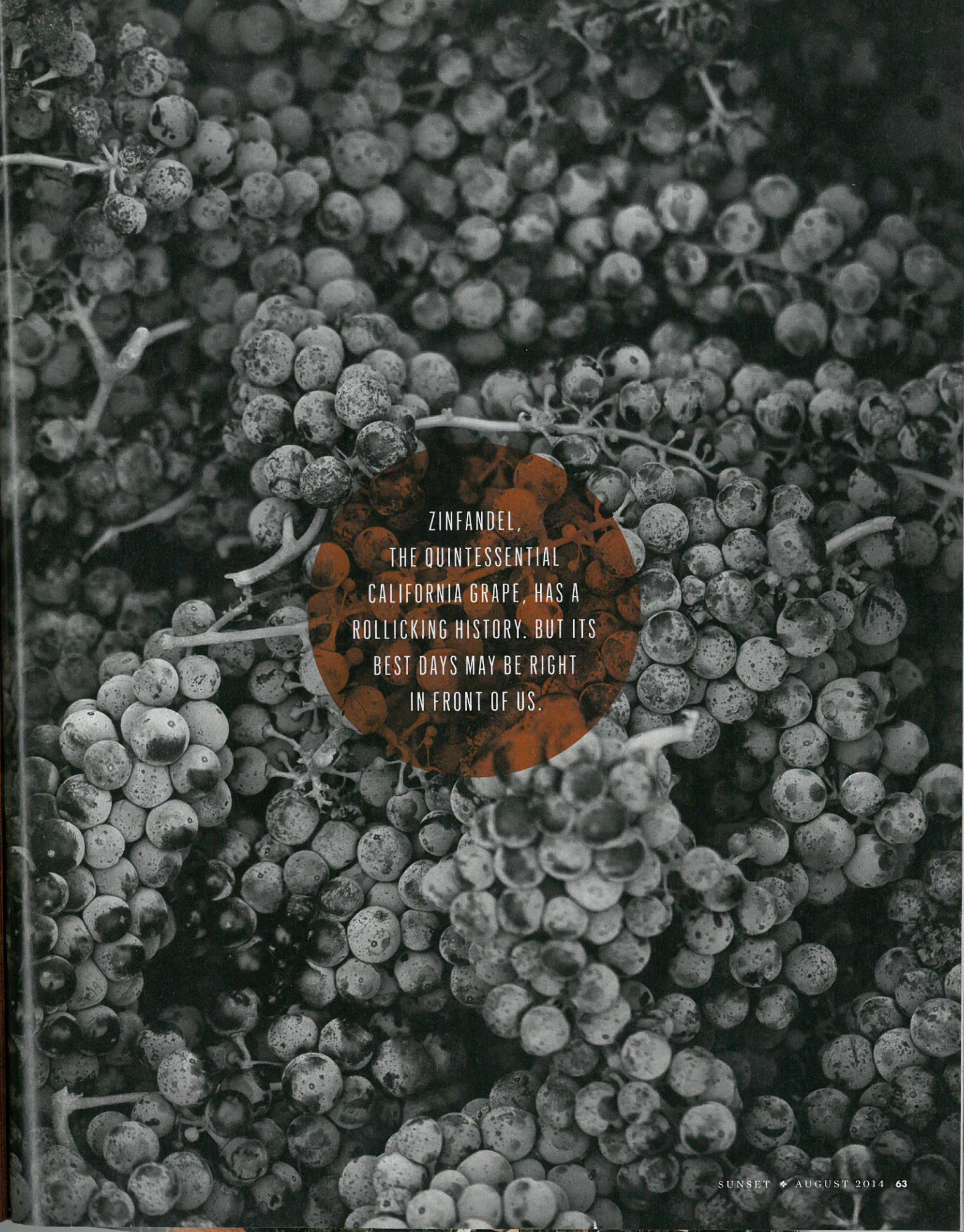


by SARA SCHNEIDER

GOLD RUSH GRAPE

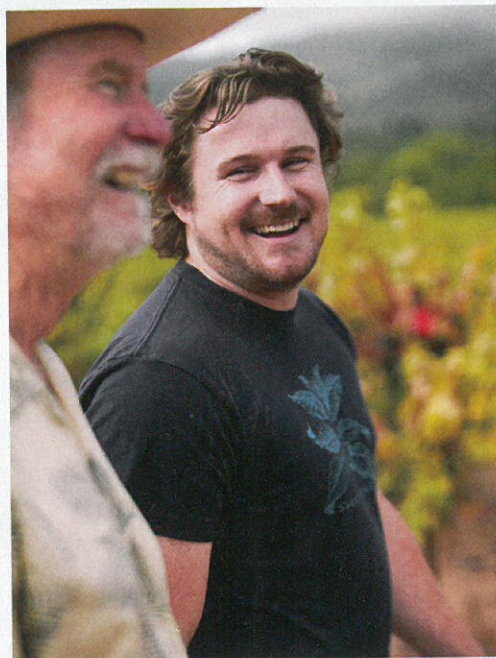
PHOTOGRAPHS by ALEX FARNUM



ZINFANDEL,
THE QUINTESSENTIAL
CALIFORNIA GRAPE, HAS A
ROLICKING HISTORY. BUT ITS
BEST DAYS MAY BE RIGHT
IN FRONT OF US.

O

Zin masters: Joel Peterson (above, left) and his son, Morgan, both make renowned old-vine wines.



n a balmy, breezy Sonoma Valley afternoon, I settle in to taste Zinfandel. I'm surrounded by thick, twisted vines, many of which were planted the same decade my grandmother was born: the 1880s. I have my reservations. Sure, Zin is the one wine in the world that the West can call its own; very little of it is made outside California. But the Zinfandel of my early-sipping memories was pink and

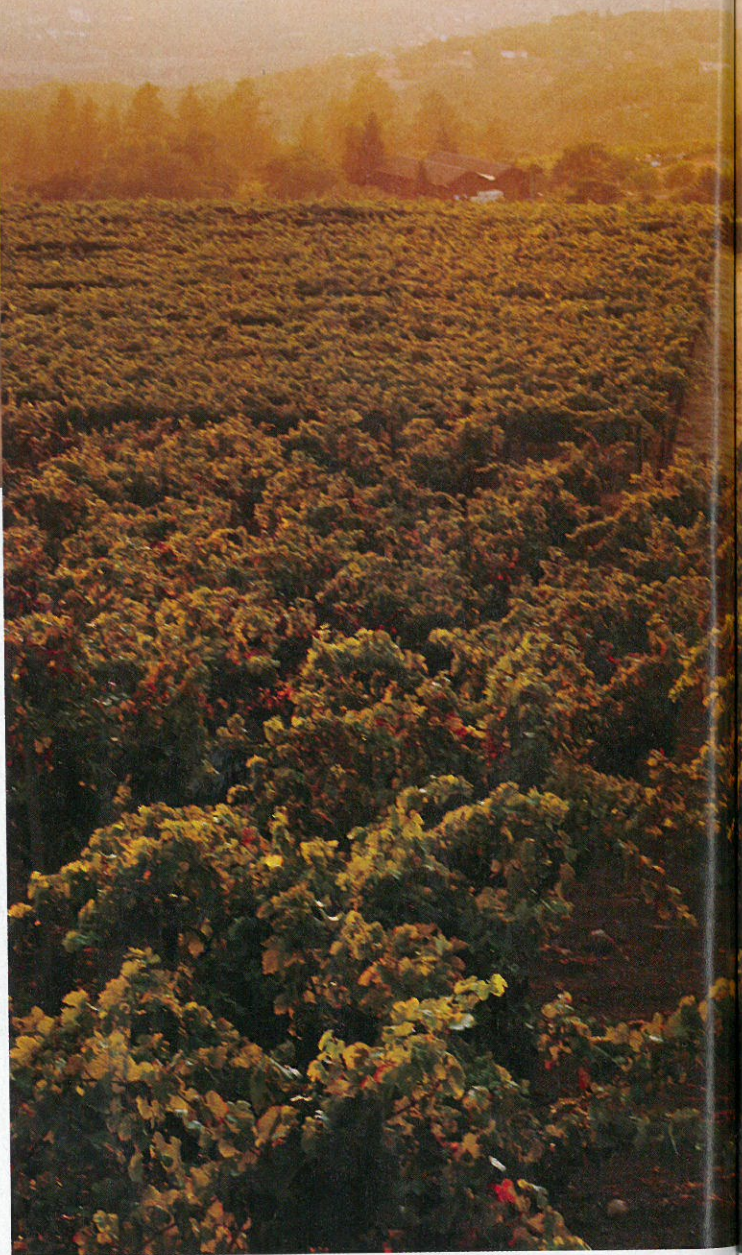
sweet—no one has ever accused white Zin of greatness. And then, just when my drinking generation discovered that Zinfandel was an appealing *red* wine, it started getting riper and riper, its signature dark berry flavors jammier and its alcohol levels out of hand. Zin became a wine that made you friends with the carpet way too fast, and one you definitely didn't want to bring home to dinner.

Today I'm tasting with Morgan Twain-Peterson, owner and winemaker of Bedrock Wine Company in Sonoma. Twain-Peterson is part of a contingent of young vintners who are pruning away at that fruit-bomb reputation, advocating for the grape and its historic vineyards, which are spread in pockets across Northern California. In all fairness, I feel the need to find out what this next generation sees in our home-state grape—which I abandoned along the way—to warrant the zeal.


"Old-vine Zinfandel and the field blends it was often interplanted with are the only things we make in California that no one else makes," says Twain-Peterson. "I don't have to channel any Old World tradition when I make wine from them."

He pours some from the venerated Monte Rosso Vineyard, which we can see on the backside of Mt. Veeder to the east. It resets my expectations of what a good Zinfandel can be—delicate and high toned, with a bright tang, but deeply layered with pepper, licorice, herbs, and spice.

It's not the last time today's Zinfandel will surprise me. Twain-Peterson is onto something. Since tasting with him, I've been floored (though not in a carpet-clinging way) by red Zins from around California that are far more balanced (read: lower in alcohol and higher in vibrant acidity), revealing more interesting flavors than the one-trick hangovers-in-a-bottle I'd known.



Although Zinfandel dates to the late 1820s on the East Coast, it was the Gold Rush that turned it into California's grape. More than a few forty-niners came to believe their fortunes might lie in the earth, though not in the form of gold. They felt that vineyards might thrive in the state's sunny, Mediterranean climate. Local nurserymen knew that Zinfandel produces profusely in its early years (considered a virtue when

A wide-angle photograph of a white pickup truck driving away on a dirt road that cuts through a vast, rolling vineyard. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the entire scene. The rows of grapevines stretch far into the distance, and the hills in the background are silhouetted against the bright sky. The truck is kicking up a cloud of dust behind it.

"THINK OF OLD VINES AS EXPERIENCE. THEY
KNOW JUST WHAT THEY NEED TO DO—AND NOT MORE—
TO GET THERE WITH THE RIGHT STUFF."

• LARRY TURLEY •

establishing vineyards in those days). As it turned out, the grape made good wine across a vast range of California climates and altitudes. It became the cutting of choice, and by the late 1800s, Zinfandel was the number one variety in the state.

I go to the source to unravel the vagaries of Zinfandel history: Twain-Peterson's father, Joel. Peterson père is the founder and winemaker of Ravenswood, a winery that

has become synonymous with the grape. (That's not an automatic pass for a wary palate like mine—I want to know what manner of Zin Peterson presides over today.)

Peterson tells me that two exceptions in the Volstead Act allowed many Zinfandel vineyards to survive Prohibition: One sanctioned sacramental wine; the other permitted individual home winemakers to produce an astonishing 200 gallons a year, the

equivalent of a thousand 750-ml. bottles.

Bad years followed bad for California wineries, with the withering Depression and World War II. Those winemakers who endured at all resorted to jug wine—"Hearty Burgundy," "Chablis," and the like.

It's hard to believe today, but labeling bottles by grape variety wasn't a widespread practice in California until the late 1960s and '70s. About that time, a valiant

10

ZIN FACTS

1

California's grape hails from Croatia.

Zin and the Italian varietal Primitivo are genetically the same grape as Crljenak Kaštelanski.

2

Zin came West in the Gold Rush.

Nurseryman Frederick Macondray brought Zin to California in 1852.

3

Zin had many labels.

In the 1800s, the Gold Rush grape was known as Zinfandel, Zeinfendall, Zenfendal, and Zinfindal.

4

Old vines can work hard.

The Original Grandpere Vineyard near Plymouth has Zin vines that were planted in 1869 and still produce wine grapes.

5

The 18th Amendment didn't hurt Zinfandel—too much.

During Prohibition, home winemakers relied on Zin.

6

Sweet white Zin was the result of an accident.

In 1975, Bob Trinchero at Sutter Home was making a dry white Zin when the fermentation stuck before the yeast had eaten all the sugar.

7

White Zin saved red Zin.

The success of white Zin in the 1970s saved many vines that are used today for classic red Zin.

8

35 is the new 50.

"Old vine" has no legal meaning; some labels use it for vineyards over 35, others for over 50.

9


Zin has remarkable range.

The grape can be used to make everything from claret-style reds to dessert wines, rosés to ports.

10

Zinfandel is the only grape with its own multiday festival.

The Zinfandel Experience takes place January 29–31, 2015, in San Francisco.



Versatile Zinfandel makes up 10 percent of the California wine harvest.



THE ZIN ROAD

You can spot gnarled, bushy old Zinfandel vines along the byways of many California counties—Mendocino, Napa, Sonoma, San Joaquin, Amador, northern San Luis Obispo (Paso Robles). But the mother lode can be found on the roads lacing Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley. And the tasting rooms along the way are the ideal place to try wines from ancient vines. We've mapped a few of the best to get you started.

few winemakers—most notably Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards—saw the potential of the gnarled old Zinfandel vines, which had survived both Prohibition and Hearty Burgundy, to produce gorgeous, dark-fruited, spicy wines. And Draper, as thoughtful a vintner as I've ever met, isn't likely to tilt at windmills in the cause of a hopeless grape.

One other pioneer who quested after riveting Zin was Peterson himself. His first vintage is the stuff of legend: In 1976, as he describes it, he was madly picking up his first harvest in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley as a storm rolled in (rain would have been death to the wine). Two ravens were circling, cawing, echoing "nevermore" in his mind. Yet, as the storm chased his truck back to the winery, rainbows broke out and torrents came down everywhere but on his grapes. The ravens became Peterson's totem.

When it comes to Zinfandel, though, good stories aren't enough for a good bottom line. A few years into crafting beautiful bottles from key old vineyards in Sonoma, Peterson was accosted by his business partner with a problem: "You're making great wines, and we're selling every bottle. But we're not making a penny."

Zin has never been the grape to plant if you're interested solely in return on investment, but other winemakers had found ways to make it profitable. Bob Trinchero of Sutter Home Wines, for example, had galvanized the marketplace—accidentally. In 1975, Trinchero pulled a little juice off some Zinfandel to concentrate the red wine. It's an old French technique called *saignée* ("to bleed"), and the juice that is pulled off is generally

fermented like white wine into a crisp rosé. Trinchero had done this before, dubbing the dry blush wine "white Zinfandel." This time the fermentation stuck before the yeast had eaten up all the sugar. He bottled the sweet wine, and it was a runaway success.

Peterson came up with a different way to turn a profit: Ravenswood Vintner's Blend Zinfandel. A much larger production, more efficiently made from less expensive grapes than his single-vineyard old-vine bottles, it's the world's best-selling premium red Zin. And that wine allows Peterson to continue making the dark, spicy old-vine wines

that are now calling my Zin resistance into serious question. They've also helped attract an ardent group of fans to the grape who were quicker on the uptake than I've been.

Enter Larry Turley, who inadvertently fomented the wild race toward high-alcohol Zins. Turley Wine Cellars made a splash with its first Zinfandel, a 1993 that featured an eye-popping alcohol level: "It was well up to 17 percent," Turley admits. "But it was balanced!" Robert Parker, the world's predominant wine critic, gave that Hayne Vineyard Zinfandel a score of 95–97 on his 100-point scale in *The Wine Advocate*. And the chase was on.

Turley is clear about not being a winemaker. He spent 24 years as an emergency room doctor; now his business card just reads, "Debtor." But with Turley and his current winemaker, Tegan Passalacqua, I pick up a singular passion for this one wine, and a fascination for how it expresses itself from place to place, and age to age (vine age, that is).

Across a picnic table in the yard that sits between Turley's restored century-old home and his winery in northern Napa Valley, Turley and Passalacqua parse the alcohol race for me. "A lot of folks wanted to be like Turley after that first wine," Passalacqua says. "But they bought poor grapes and picked late—and gave Zin a bad name." The result of picking late, of course, is that sugar levels are high and resulting alcohol levels shameless.

Since being named winemaker at the beginning of 2012, Passalacqua has dialed back alcohol levels. For the best balance, Turley looks to old vines: "They can carry higher sugar and still retain acidity." And with 24 Zinfandels in their portfolio from eight counties (from Sonoma to San Luis Obispo, Contra Costa to Amador), Turley and Passalacqua have ample means to compare.

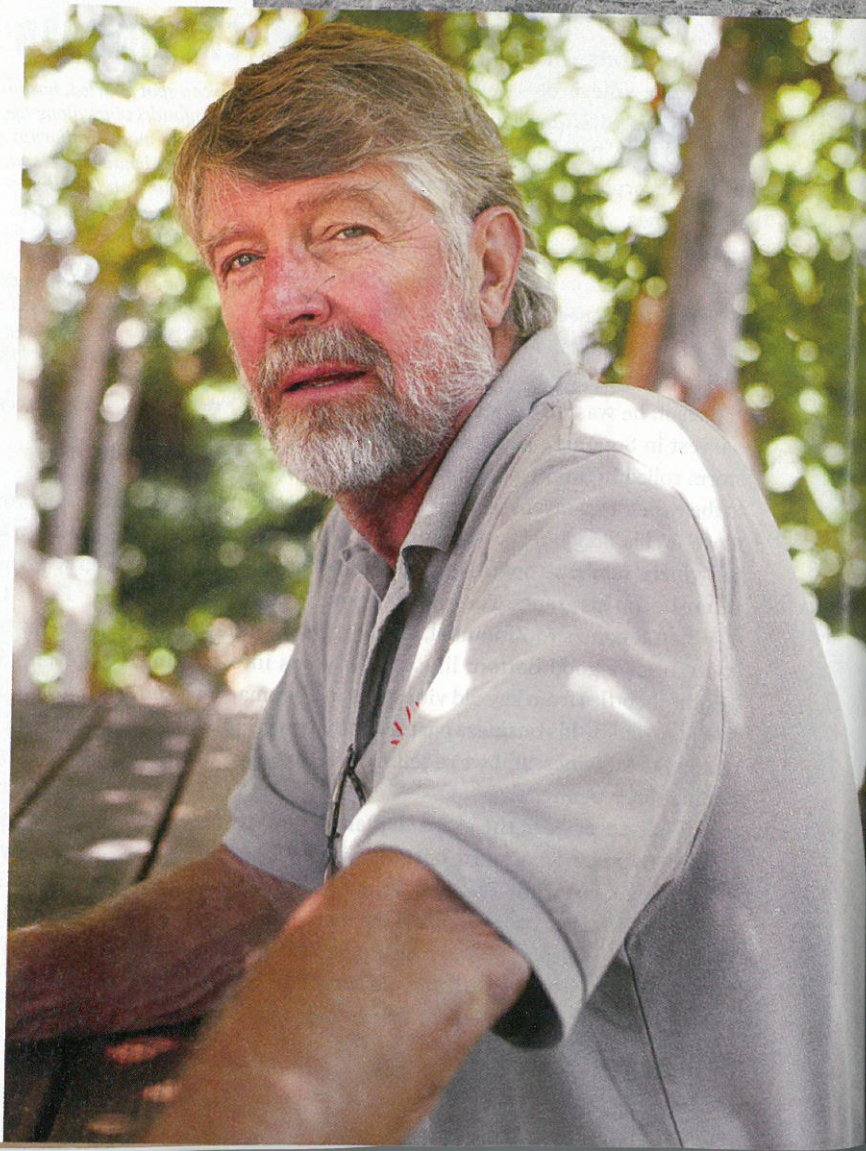
As I make my own comparisons, tasting a healthy cross section of Zinfandels from around the state, I have to agree with Passalacqua that the wine's style—and presumably our taste—has evolved.

Alcohol is coming down, and Zin is now an ideal dinner guest. Ridge Vineyards' 2012 East Bench, for example, has vibrant, food-friendly acidity that carries layers of dark fruit. Of course there are still Zins on shop shelves with audacious alcohol levels. The range is enormous.

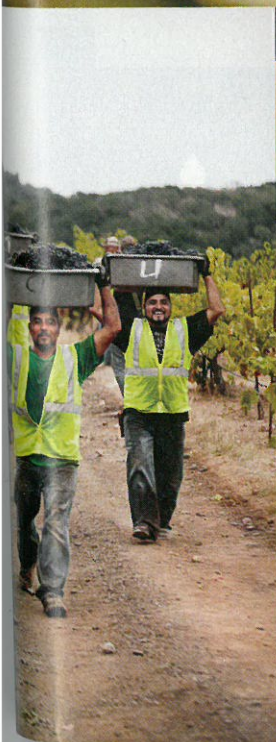
The challenge, then, is knowing what kind of Zinfandel we're getting before we pull the cork. My bottle picks on page 69 should help. Many of them show the depth and concentration of their old-vineyard sources. "Think of old vines as experience," Turley says. "They know just what they need to do—and not more—to get there with the right stuff." And how about old-vine wine? "If you talk to a young person," Turley explains, "they're energetic but not full of depth. Older, more thoughtful souls have more layers. They make you pause."

Apparently, old-vine Zinfandels are also capable of making Old World winemakers pause. "The French love Zin!" says Twain-Peterson. "Maybe it's because they don't have to compare it to their old benchmarks. It doesn't put them into a defensive crouch."

My own defenses are headed for the exits. These are winemakers who've gone all in behind a wine that isn't made with so-called "noble" grapes, such as Cabernet, Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay. A wine with a price point low enough to make for a tricky business model. Quixotic? Perhaps. Certainly, these vintners are mavericks all, comfortable working without a template. The Zinfandels, elegant and complex, that young winemakers like Twain-Peterson and Passalacqua are making from the West's home-grown grape have a nobility all their own.



gan Passalacqua
and Larry Turley
(from left) strive for
balances that balance
the fruit and acidity.



BUY RIGHT

SARA'S FAVORITE ZINS

Amapola Creek 2011 Monte Rosso Vineyard
(Sonoma Valley; \$42).
Spiced compote kissed with violets and vanilla gives way to minty berry and red plum fruit with some heft from tannins underneath.

Bedrock Wine Co. 2012 Old Vine
(Sonoma Valley; \$25).
Layers of savory wet earth, berry briars, pepper, and mocha under bright plum.

Dashe 2011 Florence Vineyard
(Dry Creek Valley; \$35).
Perfumed with floral aromas, vanilla, and earth, the strawberry and cherry fruit are spiced with cinnamon.

Dry Creek Vineyard 2012 Old Vine
(Dry Creek Valley; \$30).
Spiced berry pie with aromas of mocha, sarsaparilla, herbs, and loam.

Frog's Leap 2012
(Napa Valley; \$30).
Spicy cherry and raspberry fruit with a dark side of black pepper and loam.

Grgich Hills 2010
(Napa Valley; \$35).
Sweet boysenberry and red cherry wrapped in layers of tobacco, slate, and pepper, with tightly wound tannins.

Howell Mountain Vineyards 2010 Old Vine
(Napa Valley; \$45).
Dark-souled and stone-washed, delicious raspberry and cherry fruit is seasoned with mint and anise.

JC Cellars 2011 Hayne Vineyard
(Napa Valley; \$50).
Stony minerality, briars, and pepper lend a savory side to a core of intense sweet ripe fruit.

Lambert Bridge 2012 Forchini Vineyard
(Dry Creek Valley; \$55).
Bright raspberry and cherry with whiffs of violet belying pepper, tobacco, and earth.

Lodi Native
(Lodi; \$180/set).
Six fascinating wines made from heritage vineyards by winemakers who agreed to use minimalist techniques to spotlight pure old fruit.


Ravenswood 2011 Teldeschi Single Vineyard
(Dry Creek Valley; \$35).
A savory crushed-herb quality sets off black plum flavors with hints of vanilla, coffee, spice, and dark chocolate.

Ridge 2012 East Bench
(Dry Creek Valley; \$28).
Fine-grained tannins under dark berry and cherry fruit with mocha, vanilla, licorice, and violets.

Robert Biale 2012 Stagecoach Vineyard, the Biale Block
(Napa Valley; \$50).
Minty blackberries with balancing notes of vanilla and crushed herbs.

Rodney Strong 2012 "Knotty Vines"
(Sonoma County; \$25).
Lush, bright, appealing plum and berries touched with licorice and dust.

Seghesio 2011 Old Vine
(Sonoma County; \$38).
Floral aromas perfume layers of concentrated raspberry, tangy orange peel, white pepper, mocha, and spice.

Turley 2011 "Judge Bell"
(Amador County; \$32).
Herbal, minty aromas lead to spiced plum flavors with a great pepper kick. 

S DIGITAL BONUS Your wine country visitor guide—where to stay, eat, and play in Napa and Sonoma: sunset.com/napa-sonoma.