



# PASSIONATE ABOUT ZIN!

From Dry Creek to Cucamonga to Paso Robles,  
winemakers and wine drinkers alike are  
crazy about their beloved Zinfandel.

BY ROGER MORRIS



## Zinfandel is a wine that induces passion—call it “Zinfanaticism.”

In 1991, an organization was created to promote Zinfandel because there was a feeling that it was under-appreciated in its native California, “an underdog with a cause,” as they put it. Today ZAP—Zinfandel Associates and Producers—is the biggest such wine-and-grape advocacy organization in California and perhaps the world, with hundreds of producers and thousands of consumers as members. Among the many ZAP-related activities is even the “University of Zin,” which has special ocean cruises.

Winemaker Joel Peterson felt so passionate about Zinfandel when he created his Ravenswood Winery in Sonoma that he made about a dozen versions of Zinfandel and coined the phrase that became a rallying cry for Zinfandel lovers everywhere: “No wimpy wines!”

And along Sonoma’s Dry Creek Valley, considered by many to be the epicenter of Zinfandel production, old-vine vineyards of predominantly Zinfandel grapes have been protectively selected as “heritage vineyards.”

The statistics confirm the passion. “Today, Zinfandel is the third-leading wine grape variety in California, with more than 47,000 acres planted, according to the 2012 California Grape Acreage Report,” according to a report from the Wine Institute. “The 2012 California Zinfandel crush weighed in at 448,039 tons—up a sizeable 30 percent from 2011.” Only Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon have higher production. Not bad for a grape that until recently did not even know its own parentage.

The fact that the name “Zinfandel” is unknown elsewhere in the wine world, unlike the international Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon, is part of its charm. In time Zin has become regarded in practice, if not in actual fact, as California’s own “indigenous” grape.

Growers and consumers alike have claimed it as their own. That, and the fact they it grows almost everywhere in California—from the historic vines in Cucamonga near Los Angeles to Paso Robles in on the Central Coast to Napa and Sonoma counties on the North Coast to the Sierra foothills—give Zinfandel a very wide geographic following.

Finally, Zinfandel’s tastes appeal to a broad band of consumers—from those who love its big, fruity, spicy, zesty and certainly un-wimpy flavors to those who prefer the lightly sweet, lightly colored “white Zinfandel,” both made from the same grape.

Although few people realize it, Zinfandel began its American adventure as an East Coast table grape, not surprising considering the American East and Midwest had a thriving wine and fruit business long before the influx of farmers into California following the gold rush. According to research by C.L. Sullivan, vines were brought from Austria to Long Island in about 1829 and were later taken to the Boston area. It was during this period that it became known as “Zinfandel” or “Zenfandel.” A shipment of vines to California in 1852 included Zinfandel, and, before long, it was a dominant grape there.

But it was not until the fall of 2002 that the University of California at Davis announced that, by doing conclusive genetic testing, it had cut through all the conflicting legends about the grape’s origins before it arrived in Long Island on its way to California. In a press release, Carole Meredith, a UC Davis grapevine geneticist proclaimed: “Zinfandel comes from Croatia. The grape we call Zinfandel, and the grape the Italians call Primitivo, are both Crljenak Kastelanski.” Nice to know, although no one in California rushed to use the original name.

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If the grape’s origin had been a mystery for 150 years, there is generally agreement that three winemakers in the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s did the most to popularize Zinfandel by making some stunning, age-worthy wines at a time that Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon was getting all the press. Peterson, often called “the godfather of Zin”; Paul Draper of Ridge Winery, who in the 1970s popularized vineyard-designated Zinfandels from old-vine plots he sourced from across the state; and Kent Rosenblum, who made lovely Zins in his East Bay warehouse wineries from purchased grapes, are perhaps the most-familiar figures in Zinfandel winemaking history.

But, as Peterson’s son, winemaker Morgan Twain-Peterson, points out, many of those old-vine vineyards were not 100 percent Zinfandel plantings but Zinfandel-dominated field blends—that is, small amounts of other varieties were planted among the Zinfandel vines. Twain-Peterson argues that these 19th century farmers did so by design.

On the website of his Bedrock Wine Company, Twain-Peterson makes a case for purposeful planting: “When early immigrants came to California and started planting vineyards in the early 1850s, they had to rely on the vineyard even more than we do now,” he writes. “Back then, in the dusty days of horse-driven plows and dank cellars where gravity was the only aid, the blend was concocted in the vineyard by planting different varieties in an attempt to create a balanced wine.” Everyone agrees that Zinfandel, for all its charms, sometimes needs extra acidity and can yield higher alcohol. Adding other grapes can help make a more balanced wine.

One of the other difficulties encountered in growing Zinfandel is that the berries sometime ripen unevenly within a cluster, leaving green, bitter berries when the rest have ripened. Additionally, once bunches have ripened fully, they tend to then turn “raisiny” quickly, which will give port-like flavors and higher alcohols to the wine (admittedly a condition that not all Zinfandel lovers view negatively).



As a precaution, Jeremy Kreck, winemaker at the family-owned Mill Creek Vineyards west of Healdsburg, says it is important during harvest “to be in the field, being sure that dried, green or ‘water berries’ aren’t picked.”

Although Joel Peterson sold Ravenswood a dozen years ago to a major corporation, he stayed on as a consultant for both vineyard and winemaking practices. Not long after, he shared with this writer his thoughts about making Zinfandel.

“I make all of these wines the same way, because I do believe in terroir,” Peterson said. “My mentality is more European—open-top fermentation, punch down [to break the crust of grape skins], natural yeast, about 18 months in the barrel.” Does he still use stems to make sure his wines aren’t wimpy? He laughs. “I have a new winery, but I kept my old crusher,” he says, “and it’s so bad I get stems anyway.”

Draper has sourced Zinfandel grapes from across the state, most notably from Paso Robles and the mountains beyond Sacramento, but he told me several years ago that he thought Sonoma County, most notably Dry Creek Valley, produces the best fruit for winemaking. Not surprisingly, when one of Ridge’s primary vineyard sources—Lyton Springs, from which it had purchased grapes since 1972—became available in 1991, Ridge bought the property and established a second winery there.

“In my opinion, what makes Dry Creek Zinfandels different is that they have less raisiny fruit in aromas and tastes,” says Erik Miller of Kokomo Winery in Dry Creek Valley. “They tend to be more elegant and have a friendlier style than the bigger Zins.” As a rule of thumb, those in Paso Robles are considered to be more robust, and those in the mountains spicier and earthier.

Casual wine drinkers are often surprised to find that these big red wines come from the same grapes as do the highly popular, lightly sweet rosé wines that became known as “White Zinfandel.” Initially, these wines with a touch of pink color from the Zinfandel grape skin were made in a dry manner. But an incomplete fermentation at Sutter Home in 1975 left some sugar that did not convert to alcohol—and presto!—a star was born. But even the somewhat-negative reputation of White Zinfandel among wine aficionados is being revised as some respected producers are making dry, intricate Zinfandel rosés, including winemaking guru Helen Turley.

Meanwhile, new, small producers continue to discover their passion for Zinfandel.

When William Talty opened his Talty Winery in Dry Creek Valley a few years ago he also made wines from Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. But he quit producing both to concentrate on making different cuvées from one grape—his beloved Zinfandel. “I just wanted to get good at making one thing,” he says. ■

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