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15 zinfandels to drink with whatever meat you're grilling

By Michael Austin



Zinfandels to consider for summer grilling: Michael David Earthquake, from left, Ridge Vineyards Lytton Springs and Dashe Cellars. (Chris Walker / Chicago Tribune)

If you like to refer to zinfandel as the American wine, as you rightly could, now might be a good time to start tasting through some bottles to find a few of your favorites in time for that quintessentially American holiday, the Fourth of July. Plenty of tasting time ahead. Plenty of re-tasting time ahead too. You'll want to make sure that your preferences are dialed in when you pull out this red in honor of the red, white and blue.

Sure, zinfandel can be a big bruiser of a wine, and maybe you don't automatically think of that kind of wine when it comes to warm-weather drinking, but hey — you do it for America, am I right? The grape variety we call zinfandel was not born here, but through the generations, it has become as American as jelly doughnuts (aka Berliners) and hot dogs (aka frankfurters). I wouldn't drink zinfandel with either of those fully assimilated foods, but I would drink it with hamburgers (and any Hamburgers who happen to be in town) or just about any meat from the grill, braised meats, roasted duck, pizza or meaty pasta dishes.

I would also drink it with great attention to pacing, as many zinfandels can approach or even exceed 15 percent alcohol. This is a potent red wine, dry and usually full of ripe fruit and spicy black pepper. Notes of plum can be joined by blackberry, cherry, raspberry, anise, raisins, clove and chocolate, plus a whiff of toast, smoke or vanilla from oak aging. Medium- to full-bodied, zinfandel is not a wimpy wine in any way. Believed to have originated in Croatia, where it is known as both crljenak kastelanski and tribidrag, zinfandel came to the United States in the 19th century, and is now one of California's most widely planted red grape varieties.

I recently tasted a bunch of zinfandels from various parts of California, and 15 of them are listed below with brief notes on each. They are listed in ascending order according to price, and 10 of the 15 ring up for \$26 or less. Start tasting ... the Fourth will be here before you know it.

2015 Joel Gott Wines Zinfandel. Made of 100 percent zinfandel from several California appellations, this wine offered baking spices, plum, rich blackberry, vanilla and cherry. Silky and luscious, it was a joy to drink and well worth the price. \$16

2014 Edmeades Zinfandel. From Mendocino County, this wine is a blend of 77 percent zinfandel, with petite sirah and syrah. It offered baking spices, black cherry and other dark fruits, an herbal quality and vanilla, plus a potent 15.5 percent alcohol. \$17

2014 Klinker Brick Old Vine Zinfandel. Drawing from several Lodi vineyards, with vines averaging 86 years old, this wine had a silky mouthfeel that delivered jammy berries and dark fruit, herbs, damp earth, cigar box and a mocha finish. \$19

2015 Bear Flag Wine Zinfandel. A Sonoma County wine, this one was full of luscious blueberry and black fruits, plus nutmeg, baking spices, vanilla, herbs and black pepper on the finish. Texturally, this lip-smacking wine was soft and mouth-filling. \$22

2014 Dashe Cellars Zinfandel. Floral, with plum, dark fruits, ripe dark cherry, cranberry, leather, black pepper and chocolate, this 95 percent zinfandel/5 percent petite sirah blend had a velvety mouthfeel. It hails from Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County's renowned zinfandel region. \$22

2013 Kenwood Vineyards Jack London Vineyard Zinfandel. Using Sonoma Mountain fruit and composed of 99 percent zinfandel (and 1 percent syrah), this one offered plum, tobacco, smoke, black cherry, cocoa, cedar and tangy raspberry, plus 14.5 percent alcohol. \$22

2015 Peachy Canyon Westside Zinfandel. Bursting with baking spices, this Paso Robles wine had notes of plum and blackberry with a streak of bright raspberry. The fruit was joined by suggestions of herbs, dried pine needles, vanilla and dark chocolate. \$22

2015 Seghesio Family Winery Zinfandel. From Sonoma County, here is a wine with strong herbal notes, along with dark, juicy fruits, including ripe plum and blackberry. The wine also had a distinct brightness and freshness to balance its ripeness. \$22

2014 Ravenswood Single Vineyard Teldeschi Zinfandel. Another one from Dry Creek Valley. This incredibly silky wine had jammy fruit, including blackberry and plum, plus floral notes, spice, cocoa powder, black pepper and 15.1 percent alcohol. \$25

2014 Michael David Earthquake Zinfandel. This Lodi wine was bursting with incense, raspberry, smoke, herbs, baking spices, jammy dark berries, anise and black pepper. Its many layers led to an evolving and satisfyingly slow-developing finish. \$26

2015 Frog's Leap Zinfandel. From Napa Valley, this wine was floral with black fruit, black licorice, herbs and a lighter body. Made of 79 percent zinfandel, it was easy to drink — almost refreshing — and clocks in at a reasonable-for-zinfandel 13.6 percent alcohol. \$30

2015 Chateau Montelena Calistoga Zinfandel. Brimming with blackberry, plum and smoke, plus spice, black pepper and chocolate on the finish, this Napa Valley wine comes from the winery that won the Paris Wine Tasting of 1976 with its chardonnay. \$39

2015 Ridge Vineyards Lytton Springs Zinfandel. From a legendary zinfandel producer in Dry Creek Valley, this zinfandel-dominant blend was full of dark fruit, herbs, smoke and a bright streak of acidity, plus spice and zesty black pepper on its long finish. \$40

2015 Robert Biale Vineyards Black Chicken Zinfandel. This Napa Valley offering gave up strawberry, blueberry, black cherry, vanilla and cedar. Its zingy acidity and grippy tannins make it a great wine for just about anything hot off the grill. \$48

2014 Bella Grace Vineyards Reserve Zinfandel. Dark fruits, raspberry, black olive and fig combined with eucalyptus, a whiff of sassafras and black pepper in this beauty. Complex and continually developing, this silky wine hails from Shenandoah Valley. \$49

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/dining/drink/wine/sc-food-zinfandel-tasting-wine-0525-story.html>