

# The International Wine Review

## California Zinfandel: A New Look

Foreword by Joel Peterson



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## Foreward

Zinfandel has a long history in California. Much of that history is about adaptation to changing circumstance. The last 40 years have brought more change to the style and quality of the wines made from Zinfandel than ever before. Hence, while much has been written about this grape and its wine over the years, it is a bit surprising that a comprehensive up-to-date synopsis of its history in California, the growing regions that it inhabits, the winemakers who have wholeheartedly embraced it, or the excellent wines that are crafted from Zinfandel has not emerged. Fortunately that has changed with this report.

As the modern California wine business has emerged from the late 1960's the skill of its winemakers, the understanding of viticulture, wine making technology and consumer enthusiasm have all reach levels never before achieved. This has benefited Zinfandel greatly. Its ancient DNA has found a comfortable fit in the evolving California wine scene. The wines are better, at all levels, than they have ever been.

The current review of California Zinfandel from the good people at the *International Wine Review* could not come at a more opportune time. They have written a thorough review of the current state of Zinfandel in California, its history, growing regions, winemakers, wineries and of course, its wine. While I cannot endorse the scores given the wines, as they are entirely the opinion of the *International Wine Review*. I enthusiastically embrace the informational content contained in this report. The review is interesting, well researched and worthwhile reading for all those who care about fine red wine, especially Zinfandel.

**Joel Peterson**

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# Introduction



Kunde's Century Vines in Sonoma Valley

Zinfandel is America's grape. For well over 150 years this "heritage grape" has been widely planted in California and is today producing outstanding wines of great diversity and character. No grape has had a more enthusiastic following by American consumers than Zinfandel. Viz the annual Grand Tastings of Zinfandel held in San Francisco organized by the Zinfandel Advocates and Producers (ZAP). This past February's event saw more than 1500 attendees taste over 600 different Zinfandels poured from several of California's growing regions.

Notwithstanding its current popularity among wine enthusiasts, Zinfandel has had a checkered history. In the late 19th and early 20th century it was the most widely planted variety in California, but in the years following Prohibition it was slowly replaced by Cabernet Sauvignon as California's premier red variety. In the 1970s and 80s, white Zinfandel was a spectacular commercial success, while serious, red Zinfandel was beginning to gain ground. Today, Zinfandel is again flourishing due to a combination of factors that are the focus of this report.

Although Zinfandel is grown in 45 of California's 58 counties, from Mendocino to Temecula and the Sierra foothills to the valleys and coastal mountains near the Pacific, its best expression is concentrated in several major growing regions: Napa Valley, Lodi, Paso Robles, the Sierra Foothills and the counties of Mendocino, Contra Costa, and, especially, Sonoma (see map in Annex 1). Our report provides overviews of the favorable growing conditions in each region, the vineyards, and the noteworthy producers. Readers will gain an appreciation of the exciting variety of Zinfandels being produced today and the high quality of winemaking in each region.

The growers and winemakers of Zinfandel are blessed with a wide array of old vines, some like the Grandpere

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in Amador County dating back to the late 1860s. These old vineyards are primarily head pruned and dry farmed, producing grapes that are unique and intensely flavored. More than any other variety, Zinfandel delivers "history in a glass." Its 100+ year old vineyards are vinous treasures that yield some of the world's most unique wines that are often produced in small volume with limited distribution. Many are also field blends with other grapes such as Carignan, Alicante Bouschet and Petite Sirah and offer a myriad of terroir-driven flavors with unique components of earthy, spicy notes with hints of briar, licorice and slate. Our report identifies the most important of these old vineyards and the wines being made from them by California's talented Zinfandel winemakers. An annotated listing is provided in Annex 2.

Most of today's Zinfandel producers are crafting high quality wines that are improvements over the past. They are managing the vineyard to get more uniform ripening, picking grapes at lower Brix to avoid over-ripeness and retain acidity, using a higher percentage of French oak, and, in general, crafting wines that are lively and fresh. While alcohol levels will always be high relative to some varieties, the wines are balanced and rarely show alcoholic heat. The reviews and ratings of over 350 Zinfandels in the final section of the report support these conclusions.

Zinfandel is a versatile and expressive varietal. There are different styles of Zinfandel on the market that pair beautifully with a wide variety of dishes. The bold dark-fruited flavors of Zinfandels make them ideal for pairing with beef. Red-fruit flavored, spicy and well-balanced Zinfandels are wonderful with lamb, pork and poultry and shine with pizza and pasta dishes. Zinfandels also pair

well with different cheeses as part of a meal or on their own. Our report provides tips on which dishes pair well with Zinfandel.

Today California Zinfandel has never been better. The wines are of a very high quality, unique and, most importantly, prices remain reasonable compared to other varieties. For consumers, members of the trade, and the media, there could be no better time to explore the exciting variety of Zinfandels on the market. This report is a good guide with which to begin that exploration.

## History of Zinfandel in California



The Original Grandpere Vineyard in Amador's Shenandoah Valley

Until recently, Zinfandel was considered a "mystery grape" because its origins were unknown. First, the 19th century myth that Agostin Haraszthy introduced Zinfandel to California from his native Hungary was debunked. Research confirmed that Zinfandel and Southern Italy's Primitivo grape are genetically the same, suggesting Zinfandel might have originated in Italy. Only recently did genetic research confirm that Zinfandel's ancestral home is in fact Croatia (see box).

According to wine historian Charles L. Sullivan, Zinfandel was very likely imported to Long Island and Boston in the 1820s, making its way to northern California nurseries during the Gold Rush of the late 1840s and 1850s, where prospectors working the Gold Rush planted it enthusiastically<sup>1</sup>. Eventually, Zinfandel became widely planted throughout Northern California due to its high yields, its adaptability to different soils and climates, and its obvious superiority to the Mission grape that until then dominated California viticulture.



### Zinfandel's Ancestral Home

Until recently, wine enthusiasts considered Italy to be Zinfandel's ancestral home since Apulia's Primitivo grape is genetically similar to Zinfandel. However, in 2001 a team of researchers led by Professor Carole Meredith (shown here) of UC Davis discovered a grape called Crijenak Kastelanski, a genetic twin

to Zinfandel, growing along the Dalmatian Coast. Tribidag was at one time a popular variety in Croatia, but it almost died out due to phylloxera. Today, vines identically similar to Zinfandel are rarely found in Croatia, but Ridge Vineyards has worked with the UC Davis Foundation Plant Services to import plant material to California for testing and experimentation.<sup>2</sup>

Zinfandel followed several routes in making its way to California. Frederick Macondray brought it in (as a table grape) as early as 1852. Anthony P. Smith imported Zinfandel to his Sacramento gardens in 1853, and cuttings from his vines made their way to the vineyards being planted in the Sierra Foothills about that time. Antoine Delmas, a French nurseryman, also imported vines from France and from New England, including Zinfandel (although, he called it Black St. Peters). He sent cuttings to Sonoma in the mid 1850s, where it ended up in William McPherson Hill's Glen Ellen vineyard and became part of the blend in Buena Vista's Sonoma Red Wine. In Napa, vintner Joseph Osborne obtained Zinfandel cuttings from Macondray and grafted them onto Mission rootstock<sup>3</sup>. Osborne's success with Zinfandel and other varieties came to the attention of the Sonoma Horticultural Society, which was presided over by Agoston Haraszthy, and Osborne sent them cuttings in 1853. By 1867, William McPherson Hill was making a Zinfandel wine in Sonoma that was one of California's first cult wines. In that same year the US Department of Agriculture praised the variety, and Zinfandel soon replaced the Mission grape as California's most planted and most important.

<sup>2</sup> Shortly after his arrival in Napa Valley, the illustrious winemaker, Mike Grgich, himself a Croatian, saw Zinfandel vines for the first time growing in Yountville and thought he was back home in Croatia. He was so convinced of the origin of Zinfandel that he later reputedly urged Carole Meredith to undertake her DNA research in Croatia.

<sup>3</sup> While not directly involved in the cultivation of Zinfandel, another important actor in its growth was General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, comandante general of the Mexican Army in California. His French physician Victor Faure planted Zinfandel from Osborne's cuttings in 1863, later making wine that captured the attention of other Sonoma vintners, as reported in David Darlington's book *Angels' Visits* (Henry Holt, 1991).

<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Sullivan (2003), *Zinfandel: A History of a Grape and its Wine*, University of California Press.

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