

ZINFANDELS

June 14, 2014

**American Wine Society
Red River Valley Chapter
Zinfandels**

**7:00 pm at the home of
Rebecca Knutson**

**\$25 members • \$30
nonmembers
<http://greginnd.com/rrvaws>**



The Black Grape of America

I do not look down upon white zinfandel, as the popularity of that fruity sweet rosé saved the zinfandel grape vines from being ripped out of California. You see, the zinfandel grape produces a beautiful, deep red, fruity and spicy wine when grown in the hot, dry climates on the west coast. Vines that are more than 100 years old, big gnarly vines, produce exceptional wines. You may not know that this grape has a very long history in America and was one of the first grapes to be imported from Europe.

The zinfandel grape was brought to New York way back in 1820 by George Gibbs from cuttings obtained in Austria. Ten years later, the grape vines were being sold in East Coast nurseries, and in the 1850's the grape made its way to Sonoma and Napa valleys. Zinfandel is a dark black grape with lots of color and was generally made into fresh fruity wines or clarets. As it was the most widely planted red wine grape in California, it became the largest component of most of the red jug wines. Since it did not originate from French stock, it was largely overlooked as a noble grape variety.

When the California wine industry began taking off in the 20th century, vineyards were being planted with cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah. Thus, the zinfandel grape was relegated to a lower status. The grape was in danger of being replaced by these "noble" vines. In the 1980's the folks at Beringer were looking at their large plantings of zinfandel, wondering what to do with all of these "lower class" grapes. Their solution was to make a blush wine, thus, the white zin was born. Its popularity convinced many wineries in California to leave those vines alone. And now, with the growing popularity of red wine in America, more wineries are once again producing gorgeous zinfandels.

Although it was known that the vines originally came from the Vienna imperial plant collection, its heritage was a mystery for a very long time. In 1967 Austin Goheen from the University of California Davis first identified similarities between the American zinfandel and the Italian primitivo grape. In 1994 Carole Meredith found the two grapes to be genetically the same using DNA testing. So, the link was made. But are the two grapes identical? Well, current research at UC Davis shows that primitivo grapes from Italy, planted in California, actually display marked character differences from the zinfandel. Further DNA testing has recently shown that both the zinfandel and the primitivo grape come originally from the Crljenak Kastelanski grape of Croatia. So, in fact, the American and Italian grapes are genetically the same, however, they are more like twins separated at birth. Regardless of its origins, zinfandel is considered a true American variety as it has been produced here for more than 150 years.

Some of my favorite zinfandel wines come from the Dry Creek Valley in northern Sonoma. I always look for "old vines" on the label as that indicates the wine comes from vines that are typically 75-100 years old, resulting in rich fruit, spice and venerable character.

Zinfandel has really grown into its own. There is an organization called ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates & Producers) based in California that is wholly dedicated to this grape. Every January in San Francisco they sponsor a Zinfandel Festival where artisan winemakers from all over assemble to taste nothing but zins. You can find more information at zinfandel.org.

THE ZINS

2010 Storybook Mountain Zin Gris

Napa Valley, California

Winery \$19.50

Patterned after the dry rosé wines of Provence, this wine is aromatic and deeply flavored. Fully mature grapes are slowly barrel fermented to dryness in our cool century-old caves.

2010 Brazil Old Vine Zin

Lodi, California

Bernies \$16.99

Big, bold aromas of rich black fruit and mocha mingle with hints of spice and soft vanilla. A core of intense, dark plum and cocoa rock the palate of this daring Zinfandel, while balanced acidity and lingering tannins add complexity, concentration and depth to the finish.

2012 Li Veli Orion Primitivo

Salento IGT, Puglia, Italy

Bridgeview \$12.59

Dense ruby red with a purplish rim, it is immediately intense on the nose with marked aromas of ripe and fleshy red fruits, notably cherries followed by spicy notes of cinnamon and nutmeg; in the mouth it is full, powerful, smooth and long, with a well defined acid streak which makes it fresh and pleasing.

2012 Terra d'Oro Deaver Vineyard

Sierra Foothills, California

Bridgeview \$9.98

Planted in 1881, this wine comes from vines that are over 130 years old. The Terra d'Oro 2012 Deaver Zinfandel has a deep garnet color in the glass and lifted aromas of dark fruit, clove and spicy oak. The palate is focused with crisp, juicy layers rich dark fruits, blackberry, cloves, allspice and soft chewy tannins. The baked spice components and black cherry soda add complexity to this bold wine and support a great balance of power and restraint.

2012 Opolo Summit Creek

Paso Robles, California

Happy Harry's \$20.99

Opolo's 2010 Summit Creek Zinfandel is a full-bodied red wine showcasing overt raspberry and black cherry fruit aromatics and flavors framed by soft tannins and balanced acidity. Subtle pepper and spice nuances further complement this wine.

2010 Ravenswood Belloni Zinfandel

Russian River Valley, California

91 pts Stephen Tanzer

Bernies \$36.99

75% Zinfandel, 25% mixed black grapes. This wine is a true field blend, in that it consists mainly of Zinfandel grapes, but also includes such varieties as Petite Sirah and Alicante Bouschet, making this wine a brilliant deep purple in color and

adding interesting flavors. Notice fresh boysenberry, and a touch of spice and greenness.

2012 Seghesio Sonoma Zinfandel

Sonoma, California

99 Bottles \$21.24

90 pts Wine Spectator

Spicy lush black fruit of Alexander Valley. Briary and raspberry flavors, along with structure, of cooler Dry Creek Valley. Balanced and elegantly structured.

2011 Ridge Lytton Springs

Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma, California

Happy Harry's \$37.79

93 pts Antonio Galloni

82% Zinfandel, 16% petite sirah, 2% carignane. Bramble, raspberry, cassis, toasted oak, and floral aromas; layered black cherry and currant, full bodied with well coated tannins and notes of licorice and black olive on the finish.

2011 Rombauer

Napa Valley, California

Bridgeview \$26.98

93% Zinfandel, 7% petite sirah. Strikingly fruit-forward. Dark red in color with a ruby hue. Bursting aromas of ripe cranberries, blackberries and crushed raspberries. Nuances of clove and mint add character and dimension to the ripe fruit flavors. Beautiful acidity intertwined with richness seamlessly create an expressive and dense mid-palate. Vanilla and plum flavors round out an unforgettable finish.

2012 Michael David Earthquake

Lodi, California

99 Bottles \$26.99

The grapes for this wine come from an old vineyard in Lodi that was planted in 1906 around the same time as the great San Francisco earthquake. Thus, the name. Mostly zinfandel blended with some petite sirah. Peppery and spicy with plenty of berry fruit (cherries and raspberries) intertwined with dusty, loamy soil, incense, and a Provencal garrigue-like note jump from the glass of this impressive wine.

2010 Michael David Rage

Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma, California

Bridgeview \$57.59

On the southern edge of Dry Creek Valley, the 45+ year old vines produce a zin with a decidedly peppery edge. Gigantic is just one word to characterize this Zinfandel. For starters, it's enormously high in alcohol—at 16% by volume, it's almost Port-like. Yet it's dry and smooth in tannins, and the heat gives a heady boost to the black currant, black pepper and sweet oak flavors. Not for everyone, but it defines this powerful Dry Creek style of Zin.