

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

ZINFANDEL WINES – January 2022

Presented by: Laurie Dane (Victoria Chapter)

INTENDED OUTCOMES:

For the persons reading these notes and attending the January 2022 Zinfandel tasting to have acquired the following knowledge:

- the other names by which Zinfandel grapes are known;
- the 3 countries most recognized for growing this varietal;
- from which country Zinfandel grapes originate;
- the taste profile expected from grapes grown in cooler climates;
- the taste profile expected from grapes grown in warmer climates;
- what foods best pair with this grape varietal;
- information on the broad representation of wines in the flight.

BCAWA DESCRIPTION:

Class E4 (Zinfandel) - A dry red table wine made from at least 85% Zinfandel grapes. Primitivo grapes are acceptable. The remaining 15% may be any other ingredient.

Technical characteristics:

Ingredients: Grapes
Alcohol: 11% - 16%
Colour: Medium red to garnet
Sugar: 0.0% - 1%
Specific Gravity: 0.990 - 0.994
Acidity: 5.0g/L - 7.0g/L pH: 3.4 – 4.0
Tannin: May be somewhat astringent.

INTRODUCTION:

Zinfandel is a medium to full body wine. Its over-ripened fruit has characteristics of raspberry, blackberry, cherry, plum, tar, earth, leather, spice, pepper. Full-bodied and with a lower tannin base makes it loved for its “jammy” taste with fruit-driven aromas. The taste of the wine is due in part to the ripeness of the grapes. Raspberry tastes will predominate wines from cooler areas, whereas you are more likely to get notes of blackberry, anise and pepper from wines made in warmer areas or from earlier ripening Primitivo clones. It thrives in heat of 90-degree days bringing out the black fruits and having higher alcohol of 15% but can also do well in cooler temperatures giving a lower alcohol volume of 13% and more red fruit aromas.

HISTORY:

Zinfandel grapes have been grown in California since the mid-1800's and prior to prohibition were the most planted varietal in California. In the 1960's through to the 1990's Zinfandel was extremely popular until it was replaced by Cabernet Sauvignon.

Zinfandel was long considered "America's vine and wine", but when University of California, Davis (UCD) professor Austin Goheen visited Italy in 1967, he noticed how wine made from Primitivo reminded him of Zinfandel. Others also made the connection about that time. Primitivo was brought to California in 1968, and ampelographers declared it identical to Zinfandel in 1972. The first wine made from these California vines in 1975 also seemed identical to Zinfandel. In 1975, PhD student Wade Wolfe showed that the two varieties had identical isozyme fingerprints.

In 1993, UCD professor Carole Meredith used a DNA fingerprinting technique to confirm that Primitivo and Zinfandel are clones of the same variety. Comparative field trials have found that "Primitivo selections were generally superior to those of Zinfandel, having earlier fruit maturity, similar or higher yield, and similar or lower bunch rot susceptibility. This is consistent with the theory that Primitivo was selected as an early-ripening clone of a Croatian grape.

Originally there was some discussion that the Zinfandel grapes had originated from Italy as the Primitivo, but Doctor Carol Meredith proved that to be incorrect. In 2001, through DNA fingerprinting Doctor Meredith was able to prove that the origins were from Croatia; from a Croatian grape called Crijenak Kastelanski (aka Tribidrag). Doctor Meredith now refers to the variety as "ZPC" – Zinfandel / Primitivo / Crijenak Kastelanski.

It is interesting to note that the European Union has allowed for the Italian and Croatian wines to be identified as Zinfandel for the North American markets. The North American markets have not reciprocated in kind for the purposes of marketing in the European markets.

GROWING AREAS:

United States of America:

While some Zinfandel is grown in Washington and Oregon, it is grown mainly in California. As stated in the British Columbia Guild of Wine Judges 2019 training program: 20% of the Zinfandel growing counties hold 80% of the Zinfandel growing area.. The following California regions are regarded as exceptional for Zinfandel, each has identifiable flavor characteristics.

- **Amador** has a reputation for big, full-bodied extra ripe Zinfandel which can be described as jammy, briary, and brambly, having aromas of sweet berries.
- **Sonoma County** is known for its juicy Zinfandel with bright fruit, balanced acidity and notes of blackberry, anise, and pepper.
- **San Luis Obispo** with its hot days and cool maritime evenings are known for being soft and round.
- **Napa Valley** produces a plummy and intense with tastings of red berry fruits, cedar and vanilla.
- **The Russian River Valley** area has mostly "old vine" zinfandel characterized as spicy and somewhat lower in alcohol than other regions.
- **Lodi** has some of the oldest Zinfandel vines in California and have a reputation for being juicy and approachable.

Italy:

Italy comes in second place in Zinfandel (aka Primitivo) production. Most of the Italian Primitivo grapes grow in the Puglia region of Italy (which is located in the "heel" of the boot).

Croatia:

Croatia grows its Zinfandel (aka Crijenak Kaštelanski) on the island of Kastela which is located off the coast of Croatia.

Other countries:

Mexico, Australia, South Africa, and even Canada (with some small plantings in the Okanagan Valley) grow Zinfandel grapes.

TERROIR AND TASTING NOTES:

Zinfandel is often praised for its ability to reflect both its terroir and its winemakers' style and skill. The grapes are known for their uneven pattern of ripening. A single bunch may contain both raisin-like, over-ripe grapes which increases their sugar and giving a higher alcohol by volume (ABV), as well as green un-ripened grapes which adds to Zinfandel's acidity.

Some winemakers choose to vinify the bunches with these varying levels of ripeness, while others hand-harvest the bunches by single berries through multiple passes over several weeks. This is one of the reasons for the high cost of some Zinfandels.

AGING and OAKING

Cellar time: 5 to 10 years

It has been argued that Zinfandels don't age well due to their high alcohol levels. However, California Zinfandel winemakers Ted Seghesio (*Seghesio Zinfandel Alexander Valley Old Vine Reserve*) and Bill Easton (*Easton Zinfandel Amador County*) argue that the level of acidity – not alcohol – is the deciding factor. While high alcohol levels generally mean lower acidity, that contrast doesn't always occur; some vineyards retain natural acidity even in the face of fairly ripe conditions. Aging the wine will diminish the fruit forward characteristics (primary flavours and aromas) of Zinfandel and replace them with secondary flavours as outlined below.

Oaking a Zinfandel wine is a personal preference as it may reduce some of the big fruit flavors.

FLAVOURS:

Zinfandel's primary flavours are determined by the grapes. The secondary flavours are determined by winemaker influence and by aging.

Primary flavours and aromas:

Apricot, black currant, black pepper, blackberry, blueberry, cherry, cinnamon, cranberry, fig, fruitcake, herbal, jammy, licorice, plum, plum pudding, raisin, raspberry, red pepper, rhubarb, spicy, and tomato leaf.

Secondary flavours:

Cashew, cedar, clove, coconut, coffee, earthy, gamey, nutmeg, nutty, pencil shavings, savoury, smoky, soy sauce, tar, truffle and vanilla.

SERVING AND FOOD PAIRING:

Serve at 15°C to 20°C

Zinfandel wines from California (medium to full-bodied) pair well with:

Meat Pairing: The hearty, bold flavors in Zinfandel make it a natural companion for the rich and flavorful world of BBQ. Try ribs, grilled chicken, duck, roast lamb, pulled pork, pork chops, blackened salmon, bacon-wrapped tenderloin, game meats, and burgers!

Cheese Pairing: Think rich and bold-flavoured cheeses (i.e. blue, feta, Stilton, sharp Cheddar, smoked Gouda, and grilled Halloumi).

Spices & Herbs: Spicy dishes from Moroccan and Turkey, which contain spices that embellish the wine's cinnamon-spice subtleties. Also, think curry spice. Go for anything smoked or charred, cajun spice, cumin, black pepper, sage, rosemary, cardamom, cinnamon, fennel, black tea leaf, coffee, and cocoa.

Primitivo wines from Puglia, Italy pair well with:

Italian foods such as pizza and sausages, grilled meats, pasta dishes with a red meat sauce, Eggplant Parmigiano as well as the Puglian classic: Pizza Rustica – a wafer-thin calzone stuffed with roasted onions, tomatoes, anchovies, and olives.

Vegetables with big flavor: caramelized onion, fire-roasted red peppers or tomatoes, grilled eggplant, mushrooms, olives, zucchini, or even baked beans.

JUDGING:

Zinfandel wines have been criticized for being too “hot” but speak to the terroir of the wine. If it has the tannins and other components to balance 15% alcohol it should be accepted on its own terms.

THE FLIGHT:

With the mentorship offered by Mary Homer (Victoria Chapter) I was able to put forth what I believe is a good representation of judging scores of this grape varietal; while includes wines from various parts of California as well as Italy and Croatia. During the tasting, see if you are able to identify the country and/or region from which the wine originates. Are there differences in taste due to the terroir?

REFERENCES:

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BCAWA.ca

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Wikipedia

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