

## Presentation Notes

# BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

September 2024

## E4 – Dry Red Zinfandel

Presented by Stephen Small - Vancouver

### **Intended Outcomes:**

After completing this session you should know:

- The description and technical characteristics of this class
- The areas of the world which produce this type of wine;
- History and origin of this grape
- Manner or style in which this wine is made – consider the meaning of ‘Old Vine’

### **Description – Class E4 – Dry Red 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.

Typical aromas and flavours associated with Zinfandel wines: Raspberry, blackberry, cherry, plum, tar, earth, leather, spice, pepper. Full-bodied.

### **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 known for its versatility, producing wines that range from light and easy-drinking to bold and complex. This adaptability allows it to pair well with a wide variety of foods, from grilled meats to spicy dishes and some bolder cheeses.

Zinfandel is primarily celebrated for its vibrant fruit flavors, spicy character, and the ability to produce wines that appeal to both casual wine drinkers and connoisseurs alike.

It is made in range of wine styles from Rose (or White Zinfandel) through light easy drinking reds to darker and more booding styles. Zinfandel is also produced as a Late Harvest wine and as the main grape in Californian ports.

### **History**

For many years the origin of the grape Americans know as Zinfandel was a topic of much dispute. Ultimately DNA research and testing, lead by Carole Meredith of UC Davis, matched Zinfandel with the southern Italian grape Primitivo and an ancient Croation variety known as Crljenak Kastelanski also known as Tribidrag (Pribidrag). Reference to Eastern European trade of Tribidrag exist as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

How the grape found its way to the United States in the early 19th century is unclear but possibly brought by Austro-Hungarian immigrants it and quickly became popular in California. By the mid-1800s, Zinfandel was widely planted in California, where it thrived in the state's Mediterranean climate. Thus, it became one of the most important grapes in California's pre-prohibition wine industry.

Zinfandel became the backbone grape of the Californian “jug-wine” industry post prohibition, often sold as Claret or other Bordeaux imitations. In 1975 Trinchero winery created ‘White Zinfandel’ a highly successful sweet rosé style that came to dominate consumer understanding of Zinfandel wines, a belief still common to the consternation of more serious Zinfandel wine producers.

However, the demand for White Zinfandel did have an upside, in that it deterred growers from ripping out old Zinfandel vineyards to be replaced by more profitable varieties. As a result many ‘old vine’ Zinfandel vineyards remained and are now being recognized for their historical significance as well as the quality of the grapes produced. Indeed “Old Vines” is now a common marketing feature of commercial Zinfandel labels

### **Growing Areas:**

The grape known as Zinfandel is primarily grown in California, where it is one of the state's signature grape varieties. It thrives in several regions across the state, with notable concentrations in areas like Napa Valley, Sonoma County (especially Dry Creek Valley), Lodi, Paso Robles, and the Sierra Foothills. Each of these regions contributes unique characteristics to Zinfandel wines due to variations in climate, soil, and altitude.

Outside of California, Zinfandel is also cultivated in smaller quantities in other U.S. states like Oregon, Washington, and Texas. Internationally, it is grown in Puglia, Italy (as Primitivo), Australia, South Africa, and even Croatia, its ancestral home. However, it remains most strongly associated with California, where most of the best quality Zinfandels are grown.

As noted above the term Old Vine is commonly associated with Zinfandel bottlings from California, but many of the oldest vineyards were planted to mixed varieties, where Zinfandel was only the largest component. For example, the 135 year old Bedrock Vineyard in Sonoma county lists 27 different varieties, while the Old Hill vineyard near by may be 75% Zinfandel but also contains interplanted varieties such as Carignane, Petit Syrah, Grenache, Alicante an many more.

### **Terroir And Tasting Notes:**

Zinfandel is grown in across California in many different terroir and microclimates. It is most produced in warmer parts of Sonoma County, Russian River Valley and the Sierra Foothills as well as around Lodi in the central Valley which is well known for old vineyard plantings. Other Californian AVA's like Mendocino, Paso Robles, Temecula and even Napa produce Zinfandel bottlings. These red wines produce the classic Zinfandel profile of bold dark fruit flavours – think blackberry, black cherry with significant levels of alcohol.

Cool climate Zinfandel is grown in Oregon, Washington and a limited amount in British Columbia will produce wines with higher acidity, more restrained fruit flavors, and often a lighter body compared to their California counterparts. Meanwhile Texas produces ripe, fruit-forward Zinfandels.

In Southern Italian region called Puglia region Zinfandel is known as Primitivo. The wines are typically robust and full-bodied, with flavors of ripe blackberries, plums, and spices.

Croatia produces wines from Zinfandel's distant parent under the name of Crljenak Kaštelanski or Tribidrag.

Mexico is producing Zinfandel from extensive plantings at elevation in the Valle de Guadalupe, Baja California.

Growers know Zinfandel as an uneven ripening variety, which means on any given cluster you can find a combination of under-ripe, ripe and over-ripe (dry shrivelled) grapes. This can lead to very high brix levels at crush which are often ameliorated with water additions pre-fermentation or de-alcohol treatments post fermentation. Zinfandel wines made with over-ripe grapes are often criticized for a 'jammy' or 'prune-like' quality.

In California Zinfandel most common blending partner is petit sirah which is used to give colour, structure and spiciness to Zinfandel wines.

### **Aging And Oaking:**

As Zinfandel ages, whether in oak barrels or bottles, the tannins in the wine gradually soften.

Aging allows the various components of the wine—acidity, fruit, tannins, and alcohol—to integrate and harmonize. The bold, fresh fruit flavors typical of young Zinfandel, like blackberry, raspberry, and cherry, can mellow and evolve into more complex, mature flavors such as dried fruits, figs, and prunes.

Aging can also bring out tertiary aromas and flavors in Zinfandel, including earthy notes like leather, tobacco, and mushroom. These develop as the wine matures and can add layers of complexity to the wine's bouquet and palate.

American oak, often impart flavors of vanilla, coconut, and baking spices (such as cinnamon and clove) to the wine. These flavors complement Zinfandel's natural fruitiness, adding warmth and depth. Depending on the level of toasting applied to the oak barrels, Zinfandel can also develop toasty, caramel, or even smoky characteristics. These add richness and complexity, balancing the wine's often high alcohol content and intense fruit flavors.

The time spent in oak allows the flavors to meld together, resulting in a more rounded and cohesive wine. The oak also interacts with the wine's acidity, helping to balance and refine the overall taste profile.

### **Serving and Food Pairing:**

Zinfandel's bold, fruity, and spicy character makes it a versatile wine for food pairings.

BBQ and Grilled meats are classic pairings. It is also a good pairing with spicy Mexican or Cajun dishes as well as hearty Italian pastas.

### **Judging**

As Zinfandel is renowned for its intense fruitiness, particularly its rich flavors of ripe berries such as blackberry, raspberry, and plum.

As noted above there is a tendency for Zins from warmer climates (like Lodi) to exhibit high 'heat' from alcohol content and a "jammy" quality, with concentrated raisin and other sweet fruit flavors. This is an indication that the grapes were over-ripe when picked and is not considered an indication of quality.

The best Zinfandels should possess secondary characteristics like black pepper, cinnamon, and sometimes even clove or anise these add layers of complexity to balance the fruitiness.

Zinfandel can also be very high in alcohol content so ensure that the alcohol is well balanced in the wine.

### **The Flight**

Since the term old vine is now commonly found on Zinfandel's available in the BCLDB and through private beer and wine stores, several of the wines in this flight will be labelled as 'old vine'. As you progress through the flight see if you can distinguish a set of characteristics that indicate the wine may have been made from old vineyards.

Although there is no formal labelling requirement for 'Old Vine' to be used, it is commonly assumed that vines over 25 and preferable over 50 years old can be called old.

Old vines produce fewer grapes per vine, hence should exhibit more concentrated flavours. They are noted for more consistent ripening and so should have smoother tannins and better balance on the palate.

### **References:**

The New California Wine – Jon Bonne

The Taste of Wine – Pamela Vandyke Price

The Oxford Companion to Wine – Jancis Robinson

The California Wine Book – Bob Thompson & Hugh Johnson

Been Doon So Long – Randall Graham

Websites: winefolly.com, bedrockwineco.com, lodiwine.com