

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

April 2008

CLASS E4 – DRY RED ZINFANDEL

Presented by Cindy Kuwert (Victoria Chapter)

OBJECTIVE: To learn about Zinfandel grapes and wine that come from California.

CLASS: E4. DRY RED ZINFANDEL

A red wine to be consumed with food. Better wines in this class are virtually free of residual sugar, although a well-balanced and well-aged wine will have a softness that could be mistaken for sweetness. The garnet edge of a well-matured wine is preferable to the red-purple of a young wine. Wines in this class must contain at least 85% Zinfandel.

Technical Characteristics:

Ingredients: Grapes

Alcohol: 11% - 14%

Colour: Medium deep ruby red to inky garnet black

Sugar: 0.0% - 0.35%

Specific Gravity: 0.990 - 0.993

Acidity: 5.5 g/L - 6.7 g/L

pH: 3.4 - 3.7

THE GRAPE

Description: large reddish-black, neutrally flavoured, thin-skinned berries that form medium to large clusters; medium vigour, leaf out in late spring; compact clusters susceptible to rot; fruit ripens unevenly and tends to raisin if harvest is delayed.

Aroma: Black pepper, blackberries, blueberries, bramble, briar, cherries, cinnamon, dates, fruitcake, herbal, mint, plum pudding, raspberry, red pepper, rhubarb, rosemary, spicy, wild berries

Bouquet: chocolate, earthy, gamey, nutmeg, savoury, tar, truffle

Barrel aging: cashew, cedar, coconut, nutty, pencil shavings, soy, vanilla, wood smoke

Taste: full-flavoured, can be very tannic, with berry-like flavour – dry to very sweet

Wines: White Zinfandel, Zinfandel Rose, red varietals, late harvest dessert wines, Port style fortified wines.

HISTORY

Zinfandel is a variety with a most confusing history and lineage. Its origins have been hotly disputed for years and until recently Zinfandel was thought to have originated in southern Italy's Apulia region, where the genetically related Primitivo (di Goia) variety is widely grown. Further research suggested a possible parent/offspring relationship with the Plavic Mali grape from

Croatia. What is now generally agreed upon is that the roots of Zinfandel (as well as Primitivo) are most likely in the Dalmatian province of Croatia (in the former Yugoslavia) where DNA matches have been made with a variety locally known by the name of Crljenak Kasteljanski (also Pribidrag or Tribidrag). The genetic linkage and similar origins of Italy's Primitivo and California's Zinfandel has been supported by the work of both Croatian and UC Davis researchers. However, despite being genetically alike, over the long period they have spent geographically separated, clonal differences seem to have evolved between the two. And true enough, notable differences are evident in both vine and wine characteristics of Italy's Primitivo and California's Zinfandel.

The highly speculative story behind Zinfandel's name, its confused identity, the trans- Atlantic voyage to America, and finally its trek across the continent to its eventual home in California is far too much to deal with here and is perhaps a tale more suited to Hollywood mini-series screenwriters.

In terms of Zinfandel's wine style, the story is equally provocative. Opinions about how to classify this grape have also shifted continuously, as consumer whims have tested Zinfandel's ability to play the chameleon. Zinfandel has delivered not only zesty, berry- fruity reds, but spicy tannic beasts, vin nouveau, and tart, intriguing roses. There have also been soft, simple and sweet blushes, unusual sparklers, dessert and fortified wines, and nearly combustible, highly alcoholic versions.

CALIFORNIA ZINFANDEL REGIONS

In California, 20% of the Zinfandel-growing counties hold 80% of the Zinfandel growing area; however, major producing areas such as San Joaquin County and Madera County produce Zinfandel primarily for blends or jug wine.

Certain California regions are regarded as "exceptional" for Zinfandel, each with identifiable flavor characteristics.

- Amador has a reputation for big, full-bodied Zinfandel. These extra-ripe Zinfandels are the source of descriptors such as jammy, briary, and brambly, having aromas of sweet berries.
- Although the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA in Santa Clara Valley produces Zinfandel from just 3.64 hectares (9 acres), the Zinfandel from that region is known for its complexity and depth.
- Sonoma County has the second-largest Zinfandel-producing land area after San Joaquin. The county contains the warm Dry Creek Valley AVA, known for its juicy Zinfandel with bright fruit, balanced acidity and notes of blackberry, anise and pepper. Dry Creek Valley produces Zinfandels in a variety of styles ranging from the high-alcohol Amador style to balanced spicy wines.
- San Luis Obispo, particularly the Paso Robles AVA with its hot days and cool maritime evenings, produces Zinfandel known for being soft and round.[38]
- While the Napa Valley AVA is known primarily for its Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah, Napa also produces Zinfandels described as plummy and intense, tasting of red berry fruits with cedar and vanilla. Zinfandels in Napa tend to be made in a claret style like red Bordeaux.

- The Russian River Valley generally produces well during warm vintages; otherwise, the grapes do not fully ripen, leaving the wines with excessive acidity. The area has mostly "old vine" Zinfandel, characterized as spicy and somewhat lower in alcohol than Zinfandels from other regions.
- The Mendocino County Zinfandels have been considered high quality although not well known because they are not heavily marketed.
- Lodi has some of the oldest Zinfandel vines in California. While often used for White Zinfandel production, in the red style, Lodi Zinfandels have a reputation for being juicy and approachable.

THE WINE

The best Zinfandels are high in alcohol and full of flavours. The wine should have complexity and structure. Some are jammy in character. There is a wide range of quality as the grape's character, and intensity varies with terroir and the winemaking technique. Some are young fresh and fruity, much like a Beaujolais style. Others are made in rosé or even Port styles. Popular producers in California include: Caymus, Cline, Clos du Val, DeLoach, Dry Creek, Fetzer, Kenwood, Ravenswood, Ridge, Rutherford Ranch, and Simi among many, many others. Like Cabernet Sauvignon, the finest Zinfandel can be aged for 10 to 20 years.

VITICULTURE AND WINEMAKING

The vines are quite vigorous and like a climate that is warm but not too hot, otherwise the grapes may shrivel in the heat. They produce large, tight bunches of thin-skinned fruit, which means that bunch rot can be a problem. The fruit ripen fairly early, and produce juice with high levels of sugar; if the conditions are right they may be late-harvested for dessert wine. Zinfandel is often praised for its ability to not only reflect its *terroir* but to also reflect the skill and style of its winemaker.

The grapes are known for their uneven pattern of ripening with a single bunch having the potential to include overripe raisin like, perfectly ripen, and green, unripe grapes in the same clusters. Some winemakers choose to vinify the bunches with these varying levels of ripeness adding their own unique component to the wine while others will hand-harvest the bunches, even by single berries through multiple passes through the vineyards over several weeks. This extensively laborious practice is one component in the high cost of some Zinfandels. Decisions on when to harvest, how cool to ferment the wine, how long of a maceration period with skin contact and the level of oak aging can have a pronounced effect on the wine. The degrees Brix that the grapes are harvested at can have a dramatic effect on the resulting flavors in the wine. White Zinfandel is normally harvested early at 20°Bx when the grapes have yet to develop much varietal character, though some examples can develop hints of tobacco and apple skin. At 23°Bx (the degree that most red wine is considered "ripe") strawberry flavors develop. With 24°Bx, the cherry flavors appear followed by the blackberry notes at 25°Bx.