

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES
2018
CLASS E4 - RED DRY ZINFANDEL
Presented by James Waring (Nanaimo Chapter)

AFTER READING THESE NOTES YOU SHOULD KNOW:

- The technical characteristics of wines in this class.
- The heritage and history of this grape.
- What the main growing areas are for this grape.
- What attributes to expect in wines from this grape.

TECHNICAL CHARACTERISTICS:

Ingredients:	must contain at least 85% Zinfandel.
Alcohol:	12% - 16% abv.
Colour:	medium deep ruby to inky black garnet.
Sugar:	0.0% - 0.35%
Specific gravity:	0.990 – 0.993.
Acid:	5.5 – 6.7 g/l.
PH:	3.4- 3.7

HISTORY AND HERITAGE:

The Grape:

Zinfandel (aka Primitivo) is a black, thin skinned variety whose bunches ripen unevenly, making them susceptible to molds and bunch rot. It can over-ripen quickly causing many growers to harvest at night when temperatures tend to be lower. The variety is grown in over 10 percent of California vineyards and widely in the so-called 'Heal of Italy' in the district of Puglia. The variety, more recently, has been planted in Australia and South Africa, and some old vines have been located in Baja, California, Mexico. In recent years, attempts have been made to reintroduce the grape to Croatia where the variety was completely decimated by the phylloxera epidemic of the late 19 century.

Origin:

Reference to Primitivo in Italian Government literature first appeared in the 1870's, some 40 years after the term Zinfandel was documented in the US, leading to speculation that the Italian variety was sourced from the US. The vine first appeared in the US in Boston hothouses in the 1820's, where it was imported from Vienna, and made its way to California along with gold rush prospectors in the 1850's.

Recent DNA evidence now proves that both Primitivo and Zinfandel are clones of the Croatian variety Crljenak Kastelanski, discovered on the Dalmation coast in 2001. Recent research indicates that the historical name of this grape is Tribidrag, a highly regarded variety dating to the 14th century. While some believe this separates the relationship between Primitivo and Zinfandel, others believe this evidence clearly shows that they are the same variety that have developed some mutational variability over time.

Please visit <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zinfandel> for the expanded story of this grape's history.

DISTRIBUTION:

California is the world's leader in terms of production with 44,446 acres planted (as at 2016). The average cropping levels are in the realm of 9 short tons per acre. This data is most likely skewed in favour of over cropping in the central valley.

Italy currently has 28,600 acres under vine in Puglia where cropping levels are a more respectable 3.8 to 4 tons to an acre. This represents a 40% increase in plantings after a period which saw huge reductions due to EU incentives to uproot vines. Many century-old vineyards were lost with this program.

In California today (May 17, 2017), Zinfandel is the third leading wine grape variety and is grown in 45 of 58 counties. These counties are:

Counties	2016 Total Acres
San Joaquin (aka Lodi)	18,191
Sonoma	5,052
Fresno	3,291
Madera	2,420
Amador	2,028
San Luis Obispo	2,027
Mendocino	1,861
Napa	1,415
Kern	1,184
Sacramento	1,084
Other	5,893
Total	44,446

Statewide production in 2016 was some 400,000 short tons.

N.B. Today, grapes produced from San Joaquin, Madera and Stanislaus Counties primarily end up in blends or in the production of 'jug wines'.

In Italy today, the Primitivo clone is widely grown in Taranto Province in Puglia, where it is used to make "Primitivo di Manduria" Doc and "Primitivo di Manduria Dolce Natural" Docg, and among the hills of Gioia del Colle and the Bari Province Murgia uplands. From lesser areas it is principally used in blends.

In North America, Primitivo can be found planted in areas where South Rhone varieties such as Carignane, Syrah and Mouvedre have found success, primarily in California, Oregon, Washington State (Walla Walla) and at least in one vineyard in Arizona. Varietal Primitivo wines are available in their domestic markets but not widely marketed in other areas. Production statistics for these areas have proven to be elusive.

Because of successful plantings in cooler areas, one has to wonder how long it will be until we see a VQA Primitivo, a replacement for our failed Zinfandel foray, on liquor store shelves here.

ATTRIBUTES TO EXPECT IN THESE WINES

ZINFANDEL

While this grape is grown across the North American continent, our focus here will be on the Californians. It is made in a range of styles from light Rose and Beaujolais to fuller Dry Reds and even to Ports and Late Harvest Dessert wines. For the purpose of this tasting, we will only deal with the Red Dry style.

As with most grape varieties, flavour and bouquet of the wines can be impacted by viticultural practices, wine making techniques as well as terroir, and zinfandel is no exception.

Historically, zins produced in hotter regions tend to be big, dark fruit jammy, highly alcoholic wines, while those from cooler areas are lighter, more fruit-forward in style. Today many variations of both styles can be found.

The popular descriptors of the flavour of these wines are: raspberry, blackberry, boysenberry, blueberry, cherry, black cherry, as well as black pepper, cloves, anise and herbs.

When aged in oak barrels, flavour descriptors might include vanilla, coconut, nutmeg, peach yogurt, mocha, burnt sugar, coffee, cinnamon, clove, tobacco and fresh sawdust.

Aroma descriptors include licorice, star anise, black cardamom, smoke and black pepper.

Below find some descriptors for the primary Zinfandel growing locals.

Lodi

This town is the focal point of San Joaquin County.

The area can produce juicy, bold flavoured wines from old vines some of which date back to the 1880's. Vines grown in the eastern side of the valley find deep rich soils and produce smaller berries that show higher acidity and tannins that lead to wines with hints of black tea and dusty chocolate. Vines from the west side, where temperatures are cooler, yield wines that are lush, round and earthy with ample acidity. These wines with structure showing balanced acidity and integrated tannins offer both red and black fruit characters.

A typical Lodi Zin has rich dark raspberry to mocha flavours flowing into a smokey maple finish likely due to toasted oak ageing.

Some notable examples are produced by *Brazin, Earthquake, Klinkerbrick & Seven Deadly Zins*.

Sonoma

This county has the second largest area under Zinfandel vines behind San Joaquin County. The area receives more fog and cooler temperatures than either the Central Valley or Napa, resulting in softer wines that are rich and round showing mocha and Chinese five-spice characters. Wines from the Dry Creek area tend to be less tannic and highly aromatic. They exhibit Raspberry/Strawberry flavours along with notes of spicy pepper, anise and bramble. The best come from benches and the hillsides as opposed to the valley floor.

Wines from the much hotter Rock Pile area have been characterized as 'jammy', almost Port like.

Wineries whose wines do justice to 'Sonoma' characteristics include *Dry Creek Vineyards, Seghesio, Kokomo, and Cellar No.8*.

Napa Valley

This area is cooler than Lodi but warmer than the Sonoma Dry Creek area. Some refer to it as the perfect sweet spot for Zinfandel.

Some years ago many of the 90+ year old vines were ripped out in favour of the profitable Cabernet Sauvignon.

Wines from this area have been described as plummy and intense, tasting of red berry fruits with cedar and vanilla notes. Vines with hillside influence develop smaller berries and make more concentrated wines that are highly aromatic with notes of blackberries and black pepper. As with wines from other hotter areas, these wines show higher acidity and firmer tannins making them quite age-worthy. Many of the wineries of Napa are now making their wines in the claret style.

Some of the brands to look for are *Biale, Storybook Mountain, Turley, Frank Family and Brown Estate*.

Sierra Foothills

This area encompasses the 4 counties of Amador, El Dorado, Nevada and Calaveras. Zins from this area are usually referred to as Amador Zinfandels.

It is difficult to define an Amador County style. Some are characterized as the most jammy of all zins and have the reputation as the biggest and most full-bodied, showing deeply concentrated black fruits and silky tannins, while others are lighter with fresh red fruits and more finesse. Those from warmer areas show flavours of extra ripe raspberries, brambles and strawberries and tend to be less spicy but are rich with higher levels of alcohol. Aromas of sweet berries predominate.

Vineyards located farther into the hills produce wines showing tart raspberry notes and aromas of wet earth or granite. These wines are often tight and intense when young but evolve great elegance with age. They have been described, when young, as having a creamy cinnamon tinged spiciness with layers of tar, licorice and cedar.

Producers include *Sabon Estates, Montevina, Nevada City and Lava Cap Winery*.

San Luis Obispo including Paso Robles

Hot days with cool, marine-influenced nights make for soft round Zins. Those from Paso Robles have floral aromas reminiscent of violets and roses but exhibit the classic raspberry, cherry, brambly flavours.

Some producers to look for might be *Peachy Canyon, Opolo, Linn Colado or Chronic Cellars*.

Russian River

This more northerly region has relatively cooler growing conditions, making for lower alcohol wines with higher acidity. Here we find some years when the grapes do not get sufficient heat to fully ripen.

The best conditions are found in the Olivel – Piner area of Santa Rosa where Pinot Noir flourishes. Here the grapes ripen much later and achieve a better ripeness without the dried out berries that lend a bitter pruniness to the wine. These wines are never syrupy.

Zinfandel wines from this area, as well as from Mendocino, are not as well marketed as wines from other areas.

PRIMITIVO

The grape is small and thin-skinned with an abundance of tannin. It grows in elongated clusters with some loose berries. As with the zinfandel clone, it is notorious for uneven ripening, and prone to over-ripening rapidly and is susceptible to molds and high humidity bunch rot.

While the grape produces plenty of anthocyanins, much of it is unstable and the fruit has lower levels of malvidin which results in poor colour stability. The wine, therefore, benefits greatly from long cold soaking and oak ageing to facilitate colour stability and to soften its tannins.

Typical flavour descriptors include ripe cherry, raspberry, leather and warm licorice, while aromatic descriptors include cherry, sometimes sour cherry and raspberry, along with pepper, black pepper, licorice and sometimes hints of mediterranean spices.

While some Italian winemakers have succumbed to pressure to blend the variety with traditional French varieties, the producers from classical areas seem to be opposed to this practice.

SUMMARY

In summation, in this flight we have included examples of both Zinfandel and Primitivo wines and those from warmer as well as cooler regions. You will also find examples of range of qualities.

REFERENCES:

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