

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

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CLASS E4 – DRY RED ZINFANDEL

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INTRODUCTION

Zinfandel is not the rage it was in the 1980s and early 1990s, as there are now too many wines made from overripe fruit or from young vines, or overwhelmed by excessive use of new barrels. Today's Zin styles range from elegant, taut, and claret-like midweights to super ripe and potty behemoths, with off-the-charts alcohol levels, distinctly exotic character, and, frequently, noticeable residual sugar. Classic Zinfandels are normally medium to full in body, with fruit-driven aromas and flavours of fresh berries, black pepper, and spices, sometimes with notes of citrus zest, chocolate, and briary underbrush; they are rarely overwhelmed by oak notes. Many of the best producers continue to work largely with very old vines (some-times with "field blends" that include other grapes such as Petite Sirah and Carignan), which give consistently low crop levels and make wines with atypical creaminess of texture, aromatic complexity, and aging potential.

During this session you will be evaluating wines from three different countries.

OBJECTIVE

To gain an appreciation of Vitis Vinifera (Zinfandel/Primitivo/Crljenak Kastelanski) including:

- BCAWA Class Description,
- History,
- The Wines,
- Viticulture and Winemaking, and
- Areas of Production

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

HISTORY

At some point in the 18th century, the grape was brought over to Italy from either Caucasus or somewhere in Croatia, depending on the legend one follows, taking root in the Puglia region. It was named "Primitivo" by the Benedictine monks because of its tendency to ripen early. The vine reached New York between 1820-29 from somewhere in Europe and was grown in heated greenhouses on Long Island for table grapes. It arrived in California with the Gold Rush in the 1850s and by 1857 wine was being produced from the Oak Knoll vineyard, just North of Napa. By the late 1800s it was the most widely planted variety in California. In 2001, DNA evidence positively identified Primitivo from Italy, California Zinfandel and Crljenak Kaštelanski from Croatia to be the same grape. Today, it has come into prominence with excellent varietal releases that are interchangeably labelled as either Primitivo or Zinfandel, but most often Primitivo in Italy and Zinfandel everywhere else. Croatian producers however, have completed the circle, importing and planting the "Zinfandel" clone from California, producing and labelling the wine as "Zinfandel". The grapes themselves are 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.

THE WINES

Although the grapes can also be vinified to produce White Zinfandel, Zinfandel Rose, late harvest dessert wines and Port style fortified wines, we are concerned here only with the varietal as a red wine. Such wine can express aromas of black pepper, blackberries, blueberries, bramble, briar, cherries cinnamon, dates, fruitcake, herbal, mint, plum pudding, raspberry, red pepper, rhubarb, rosemary, spicy, wild berries ; a Bouquet of chocolate, earthy, gamey, nutmeg, savoury, tar, truffle; Barrel aging influences such as cashew, cedar, coconut, nutty, pencil shavings, soy, vanilla, wood smoke and a taste that is full-flavoured, though often very tannic, frequently very high in alcohol, with berry-like flavour.

VITICULTURE AND WINEMAKING

Zinfandel vines are quite vigorous and grow best in climates that are warm but not too hot, because grapes have a tendency to shrivel in hot weather. Zinfandel's thin-skinned grapes grow in large, tight bunches that are sometimes prone to bunch rot. The fruit ripen fairly early and produce juice with high sugar levels. If weather conditions permit, the grapes may be late-harvested to make desert wine. Zinfandel is often praised for its ability to reflect both its *terroir* and its winemaker's style and skill.

The grapes are known for their uneven pattern of ripening: a single bunch may contain both raisin-like, over-ripe grapes and green, unripened grapes. Some winemakers choose to vinify the bunches with these varying levels of ripeness, while others 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. Zinfandel wines have been criticized for being too "hot" (too alcoholic), although modern winemaking techniques have helped make them more approachable. On the other hand some Zinfandel producers believe that alcohol-removing technologies eliminate any sense of *terroir* in the wine. If a wine has the tannins and other components to balance 15% alcohol,, it should be accepted on its own terms.

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 flavours 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 flavours develop. With 24°Bx, the cherry flavours appear followed by the blackberry notes at 25°Bx.

AREAS OF PRODUCTION

USA

Although the grape is grown in California, Washington, Oregon and 13 Other States, California is "the place" for Zinfandel in the USA.

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 flavour 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.

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.

The Napa Valley AVA produces Bordeaux style Zinfandels described as plummy and intense, tasting of red berry fruits with cedar and vanilla.

The Russian River Valley generally produces well during warm vintages, otherwise the grapes do not fully ripen. The area has mostly "old vine" Zinfandel, characterized as spicy with somewhat lower alcohol content than Zinfandels from other regions.

Lodi has some of the oldest Zinfandel vines in California. Lodi Zinfandels have a reputation of being juicy and approachable.

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 California Zinfandel can be aged for 10 to 20 years.

OTHER COUNTRIES

Italy comes 2nd in Zinfandel (Primitivo) production, primarily in Puglia (the toe of Italy's boot) where three DOCs specifically recognize this grape.

Croatia has re-imported Zinfandel since it lost most of the original vines to Phyloxera. The Dalmatian region is now producing wines labelled "Zinfandel".

Mexico still has producing vineyards of Zinfandel planted in the 1930s.

Australia has producing vines in New South Wales as well as in South Australia.

South Africa also has plantings of Zinfandel for which it has won some international awards.

Canada even has a few small plantings in the Okanagan.