

AN INTRODUCTION TO ZINFANDEL

BACKGROUND:

Zinfandel is the perfect “mystery woman”. Of unknown background, but exciting, dressed in pink or preferably red, capable of sparkle, lightness, complexity, and above all, spiciness. Zinfandel thrives in California, but the origins lie somewhere in Europe.

Agoston Haraszthy, one of the pioneers of the California wine industry, is generally credited with bringing Zinfandel from his native Hungary to California. However, research by Charles Sullivan, a California historian, has shown that Agoston Haraszthy was not the person to introduce Zinfandel to California. As a matter of fact, long before Haraszthy arrived in California, Zinfandel was well known in the Eastern United States. A red wine called Zinfandal, it was exhibited at the Massachusetts Horticultural Society in 1834 and the grape was often mentioned in the agricultural press in the 1840s and 1850s. By 1858 a Sacramento nursery submitted a red wine called “Zeinfindall” which would have required planting by at least 1854, well before Haraszthy’s 1861 trip to Europe to bring back cuttings.

Recent genetic analysis of the vine has firmly demonstrated that Zinfandel is the same as the Primitivo of southern Italy. The name refers to its early ripening characteristic rather than any sophistication of flavour. The Italians immediately jumped on this connection by selling Primitivo as Zinfandel. The American’s, who built their industry by using any European regional name that would help hock their wines (Chablis, Burgundy, Chianti, Beaujolais, Champagne, etc.) retaliated by taking legal action under a recently signed agreement preventing the use of geographic names. The poorly worded agreement allowed the American’s to prevent the use of a grape name (Zinfandel) while the intent was clearly to stop the use of geographic names. There was much unhappiness with the decision in Europe.

While much of the wine industry in California looks at the early 1960s and 1970s as the birth of the modern industry, Zinfandel was already firmly established in the 1880s. Zinfandel’s ability to produce good quantities of good quality wine had made it a favourite with the miners and the hangers-on of the gold rush. By 1900, Zinfandel was seen as the claret of California, then came Prohibition. Prohibition knocked the entire American wine industry but Zinfandel survived, mainly as grape juice in tin cans with the warning “Danger – Addition of yeast may cause alcoholic fermentation”. After the repeal of Prohibition, Zinfandel continued to thrive in California and became the most widely planted grape variety. This resulted in Zinfandel being seen as an everyday quality grape and many plantings were ill-suited for the site or the climate. By the 1960s and 1970s, Zinfandel was being phased out in favour of Chardonnay.

The 1980s saw a huge turnaround in the fortunes of Zinfandel as the first blush wines were made. The juice of any red grape is clear and taking the skins away from the juice before fermentation resulted in a pretty, pink wine with a touch of sweetness. All of a sudden, Zinfandel was in short supply and the boom was on. Acreage grew to 34,000 acres making it second only to Cabernet in the red wine plantings. The swing back to reds in the mid-1990s put Zinfandel in the perfect position to ride the wave.

REGIONS:

Zinfandel does best in warm, but not hot, climates. A certain amount of coolness is required to ripen the grapes and give the complexity required. Many vineyards were planted in hotter areas with the belief that if warm is good, then hot is better. The result were the “monster” zins of Amador with 15, 16 and even 17% alcohol. Incredibly dense, dark, and full, they were also incredibly unbalanced and short-lived. After gaining a reputation for a couple of years of being

some of the most intense wines out of California, they acquired a reputation of being some of the greatest vinegars!

Once out of the hottest areas, Zinfandel began to show its best. Sonoma is perhaps the “home” of Zinfandel with wonderfully ripe, complex, spicy flavours and tons of fruit, but not out of balance. Sonoma Zins age well and can be put away for 5 to 8 years and gain in complexity and pleasure. Dry Creek Zins are amongst the finest examples, with Alexander Valley and the southern Sonoma vineyards producing their shining stars. Kenwood’s Zinfandel is a good example of an affordable Sonoma Zin.

Zinfandel also does well on mountains, where the cooler climate and intense sun bring out the flavour and intensity, but don’t ruin the balance. Mountains give smaller berries resulting in more colour and flavour going into the wine. Zinfandel also does well in specific vineyard sites – Kenwood’s Jack London Vineyard, for example, showing the quality achieved from single vineyard plantings.

WINEMAKING CHOICES:

Zinfandel is one of the world’s most versatile grapes. Because of this, it is popular with both winemakers and grape growers. Like any grape variety, there will be good versions and poor versions, but with Zinfandel the quality is over-all quite high. Zinfandel, when pressed quickly and the skins removed, makes a light, slightly sweet pink wine or “blush wine” that has been immensely popular with the public. Quite frankly, the very same popularity with the public made it decidedly unpopular with the wine press and the wine snobs. The wineries didn’t care what the press said – White Zinfandel paid all the bills and then some.

As a more traditional red wine, Zinfandel can make a wide range of styles; as light and fruity as a Beaujolais, medium in weight like a Chianti or Cotes du Rhone, fuller like a Bordeaux, and majestic as a Grange Hermitage from Australia or a Hermitage from France. Left on the vine longer, it can make wonderful port. Picked earlier, it makes a full-bodied sparkling wine. The possibilities seem endless and the quality is good. Today, Zinfandel is benefiting from the red wine boom. The spicy, raspberry and cassis flavours go well with either French or American oak (quite often the American oak shines with a Zinfandel) and there is a shortage of Zinfandel grapes. Zinfandel is good for medium-term ageing and benefits from 5 to 10 years in the bottle.

Finally, Zinfandel itself is an extremely long-lived vine. Vines over 100 years are not uncommon and are much sought-after. Production drops from over 5 tons per acre to less than 1 ton per acre and the “old vines” Zinfandels become extremely intense and flavourful. While many wine buyers find this to be the “ultimate” in Zinfandel, others find the old vines versions to be “too much of a good thing”. Especially with food, a Sonoma or California Zinfandel is often the better choice as far as pairing.