

Could the Zinfandel Resurgence Be Underway?



For as long as I've been in the wine industry there have always been waves of varietal popularity. Certain wine types, at different times and for different reasons find an audience, become popular and seem to attract the attention of the trade and consumers more so than other varieties.

Zinfandel is due for a resurgence.

For quite some time, you couldn't turn a page without reading about Pinot Noir, thanks in large part to the movie "Sideways" and a contingent of growers/winemakers in America that took it upon themselves to push Pinot Noir cultivation into new, cooler regions with astounding success. Currently, Muscat has garnered undue attention to the point where you can't turn the dial to KRAP, KHIP or KHOP and not listen to some entertainer extol in song and verse the virtue of some version of sweet Muscat.

Riesling too saw an ascent among the wine cognoscenti and elsewhere.

And for a time, we were listening to how Grenache would soon reign in our glass.

What happened to Zinfandel?

The provincial nature of Zinfandel (America's Grape!!) both serves it well and hurts it. There can be no comparison of American Zinfandel to the greatest French, Italian, Spanish or German counterparts, always a way of pushing up the profile of a particular American wine. On the other hand, the relative success of Zinfandel in America makes it a point of pride and yahooism, always a means of positively promoting something in America.

Zinfandel also is helped and hurt by its intimate connection to ancientness. When we think of Zinfandel it is difficult not to think of "old vines" or "ancient vines" or "Gnarly Vines" or



“Centennial Vines”. “Old” traditionally translates into “good” where wine is concerned and Zinfandel and “old” go together like “Oregon and Pinot”. But it must strike some of you like it strikes me that in this particular current wave of wine appreciation, “old” is not “in”.

These are the various issues that the folks at [ZAP \(Association of Zinfandel Advocates and Producers\)](#) confront on a daily basis.

ZAP was founded in 1991 by a small coterie of very serious Zinfandel producers. The idea was to promote this grape and the wines produced from it and elevate the understanding and status of Zinfandel wine. No organization dedicated to any particular wine has been more successful at fulfilling its mission as ZAP. This success has largely been a result of the annual ZAP Festival that has for 20 years been anchored in San Francisco. ZAP has become an iconic San Francisco event where thousands of wine lovers, wine producers and members of the wine trade gathered to tasted hundreds of wines and form a throng of wine glass-toting devotees.

For the past 20 years, if you wanted to understand intimately the State of the Zinfandel Grape, you attended the ZAP Festival in San Francisco in January. There has simply been no other substitution. The ZAP Festival is as close to a cultural event in the wine industry as you are likely to get. But over the years, various changes in the wine industry, the wine culture, the wine consumer, event logistics and in Zinfandel itself has forced ZAP to rethink the way it pursues its mission of elevating the status of Zinfandel.

That rethinking has led to the upcoming [“ZINFANDEL EXPERIENCE”, set for January 23-25, 2014.](#)



The highlight of the annual ZAP Festival has always been its Saturday Grand Tasting when thousands maneuver their way around hundreds of winery tables. In one afternoon, assuming you spit, you could literally taste hundreds of Zins from producers located up and down California. It has been a vinous miracle for wine lovers. The success of the Festival however has led, as it often does, to problems.

The Saturday ZAP Grand Tasting has become for many producers exhibiting their wines a simple cattle call where the throngs of people wanting tastes and wanting access to the spit buckets has made it very difficult for wineries to tell their own stories to the attendees.

Also confronting champions of Zinfandel is the fact of the more sophisticated wine drinker that wants more than a long line of tables, each pouring their wines for all comers. ZAP executives see a wine culture and wine consumer in 2013 that looks entirely different to them than the ones they confronted in the early 1990s when the organization just got off the ground. In the ensuing 20 years consumers have become much better educated about wine, about terroir, about the marketplace and have developed palates that demand more than tasting liquid. The new wine consumers think the ZAP folks is one that seeks meaning from their wine, more in-depth context and a broader set of experiences surrounding wine, be it Zinfandel or any other variety.

Again, enter the new [ZINFANDEL EXPERIENCE](#).

The name of the new ZAP event conjures up images of fast flying roller coasters (“Ride THE ZAP This summer...You may never Come Down!”). Whether you care about names of events, what it looks like to me is that the newly imagined, annual Zinfandel event in January is indeed setting a new course for a new kind of consumers.

Beginning with the January ZAP event now to be located at the Presidio in San Francisco, attendees of what was once the Saturday Grand Tasting will have the choice of attending one, two or three different “Tasting Tracks”, each centered around a different way of understanding Zinfandel.

TRACK ONE: SENSORY TASTING

Attendees will explore the ways in which Zinfandel can be paired with different foods and different food flavors with the help of 80 wineries pouring and numerous food matches for the wines.

TRACK TWO: THE RESERVE AND BARREL TASTING

Forty-four wineries will line up the wines they still have maturing in barrel along with the wines they designate as “Reserve”. It’s a chance to experience what the winemakers believe is their best as well as what future vintages of Zinfandel look like prior to release.

TRACK THREE: TERROIR TASTING

Is there a difference or, rather, a signature character to Zinfandel grown in specific regions of California. In this track, Zin Producers are segregated by region and attendees can closely examine together the Zinfandels from Napa, Lodi, Sonoma, Sierra Foothills, Paso Robles and other growing regions.

Each of the tracks will cost \$60 to attend, while all three can be attended for \$150.



Are Zinfandel lovers ready for this transition and recalibration of their favorite public tasting? Will the more sophisticated wine drinkers of this second decade of the 21st century take to this new format that emphasizes the richer aspects and contexts of Zinfandel over the idea of a large wineries lined up and ready to pour? Will the new venue for the ZAP Experience attract Zinfandel lovers from across the region the way past, large-building venues did?

I can’t imagine why not. Because I think that the folks at ZAP are right. I think that wine consumers are more sophisticated than they were 20 years ago. Perhaps more importantly, I think serious wine lovers are actually demanding (or at least desiring) a wine event that puts more meat on the bone the way this new Experience is hoping to do. But the bigger question is will the new format for one of America’s most iconic public wine tastings help put Zinfandel back front and center in the American wine drinkers consciousness?

That’s hard to say. If Zinfandel is set for a resurgence of interest, it will take a number of things to get the wine there. The media need to pay more attention. Retailers need to see profit in spotlighting the wine. Reviews need to create excitement for the wine. Social media players need to spend a little time twittering and Fbooking the variety. And, frankly, the glory that is the Old Vine Zinfandel vineyard needs to be exposed more often and more thoroughly.

I myself am a fan of Zinfandel. I'm a fan of the various styles it can deliver. I'm hugely interested in what "old vine" means and that idea can only be explored through Zinfandel. Maybe this new and upcoming ZAP Experience is just what the wine lover ordered and just what Zinfandel needs to occupy a larger space in the wine lover's consciousness.