

SF Gate – San Francisco Chronicle

Thursday, December 04, 2008

[Alice Water's Zinfandel fascination](#)



Lacy Atkins/The Chronicle, 2003

Chez Panisse's wine director also does some serious thinking about Zinfandel.

Next week, Chez Panisse begins another round of its Zinfandel festival, serving many of the older Zins in its cellar and offering a nightly flight of Zin to customers both downstairs in the dining room and upstairs in the Cafe.

At this point, you may be scratching your head. Though Alice Waters' temple to localism has always maintained its astute focus on the best of Northern California bounty, its [wine list](#) has often looked farther afield, often seeming a reflection more of Panisse's rural French ideals than its Berkeley roots. While it was feasible to find local selections from Navarro or Corison, its reputation has often been for wines from afar. Your table would more likely end up graced by a Crozes-Hermitage from Graillet; a cru Beaujolais or, inevitably, a bottle of Tempier Bandol, its Berkeley/Kermit Lynch roots stretching back about as far as Chez Panisse itself. Certainly my table has looked that way in the past.

But that only tells half the tale. Truth is, Zinfandel has been part of Chez Panisse for over 30 years, and the festival itself has been taking place since about 1982, though it was rarely discussed except between knowing regulars. Zin has been dear to Alice Waters' heart all along. In "The University of California/Sotheby Book of California Wine" from 1984, she wrote: "It is surprising how adaptable Zinfandel is, how so many different dishes go well with it."

Starting in 1975, when Joseph Phelps made a Zin for the restaurant, she and her kitchen would devise a week's worth of menus to match. Among the dishes: marinated squid with roasted red and green peppers; entrecote of beef grilled over grapevine cuttings and sauced with Zinfandel and shallots, beef marrow on toast; duck livers in a sherry vinegar, walnut oil, shallot and parsley saute; rabbit terrine with hazelnuts and Chartreuse.

Hardly Zin food. Of course, the Zins of the time are largely different creatures from the modern Zin. Certainly it was possible to find hefty 14.5 percent Zins then, but many were hovering around 13 percent, more focused on bright fruit than jam. For that matter, the wine provided by Phelps was often made as a [Zinfandel Nouveau](#), young and fruity and meant to commemorate the harvest. As Chez Panisse wine director Jonathan Waters (no relation to Alice) put it, it had "certain banana chip aromas and stained our employee porch and teeth for a few months but was fun." And more likely to play a backbeat to a rabbit terrine than a 16 percent jam monster.

The Panisse-Zinfandel connection has endured mostly because of Zin's one-time reputation as the quintessential American grape, even if its roots have been [firmly established](#) elsewhere in subsequent years. If Chez Panisse serves as a lighthouse to local, Zinfandel would reasonably be a wine of choice.

Which does not leave Jonathan Waters without his challenges as wine director, especially given his innate pull toward [earthier imports](#). "I don't really drink these wines that much at home," he says, "so for me I have to kind of calibrate and think, what do you pair with it?"

He's helped in part by the wines themselves, which skew toward the lighter style of Zins sometimes talked about as claret-like -- labels like Ridge, Scherrer, Peterson, Sky and Storybook Mountain -- and to older bottles. A recent list provided by Jonathan Waters included bottles like the **1999 Neyers Pato Vineyard Contra Costa County** and the **1995 Sobon Estate Fiddletown**. The aged wines offer a perspective on aging a wine built around its primary fruit.

The restaurant still has a house Zin (they shifted from Phelps to Green & Red a number of years ago). And it's not all wonky wines. Bottles from Turley Wine Cellars should make an appearance, though Turley's style has become more subtle of late than you might expect.

Waters (Jonathan, that is) is also helped by the food. If the restaurant's spring bounty would be steamrolled by Zinfandel's bullish fruit, the heartiness of winter vegetables can work quite well. Expect to see more stews. One longtime recipe, even mentioned by Alice Waters back in 1984, is a coq au vin made with Zinfandel. That could make a return, too. And, lo, an e-mail from him just arrived with some items for this year's menu:

- Spit-roasted Becker Lane pork loin in Zinfandel sauce
- Local squid ragout with Zinfandel and leeks
- Wolfe Farm quail salmis in Zinfandel with carrots, pearl onions and turnips
- Buttermilk panna cotta with Zinfandel poached pears

"When you work at Chez Panisse, it's very easy to work alongside the choir," Jonathan Waters told me this week as we discussed Zinfandel. "It's good for us to kind of taste them again and return to them."

That intellectual curiosity is long overdue for a wine often relegated to the heap of simple hedonism. Chez Panisse might not be an obvious venue, but all the better for that.

The festival runs from Monday through Dec. 13