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Fred Tasker, McClatchy-Tribune News Service

The worst wine snob you know will never lord it over you about his/her fancy zinfandel. It's because zinfandel gets no respect.

This is a shame.

Zinfandel can be many things -- light and fruity in a rose "white" zinfandel, lush and juicy in "starter" red wines, elegant and superbly balanced in "claret" style and august, hearty and extra-full-bodied in blockbuster red wines.

Zins can taste like black raspberries, black cherries, boysenberries, cloves, black pepper, licorice and a dozen other fruits and spices.

Backyard chefs praise them as perfect for the Great American Cheeseburger; indoor cooks like them with lasagna, pasta with big, red sauces and a host of spicy, red-meat dishes.

But unfortunately for zinfandel, the more pedantic wine fans do not consider it be a "noble" grape.

"Noble" grapes have no precise legal definition, but most say they must: one, make fine wine by themselves, without addition of other grapes; and, two, be grown internationally, not in just one country or region.

Zin pretty much flunks the international test, as it's grown very little outside America. But saying it can't make a fine wine on its own is just elitism.

"Noble" grapes are said to include only the white sauvignon blanc, riesling and chardonnay; reds are pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Tellingly, most originated in France, still seen as the epicenter of world wine despite its falling production.

Zinfandel's history has been a bit murky, even disputed over the centuries. Grown in California since the early 1800s, it long was considered America's hometown grape.

More recently, DNA research has shown it descended from an obscure Italian grape called "primitivo" and an even more obscure Croatia grape called "crljenak kastelanski." The grape moved to Austria, then on to Boston in about 1830, then to California by wagon train.

(If you want to taunt those who disrespect zinfandel, go to www.howdoyousaythatword.com, practice saying the Croatian name, then use it to defend your favorite wine.)

Stung by the lack of respect for their favorite grape, aficionados in 1991 founded a trade/support group called ZAP, for Zinfandel Advocates and Producers. Today its public tastings draw thousands of fans.

But even ZAP's website acknowledges zinfandel's black sheep image.

"ZAP was founded at a time when zinfandel was the underdog with a cause," the website says. "Over the years, more 'aristocratic' wines became the bigger draw in the market."

One good thing about this is that, like the equally disrespected white, sauvignon blanc, zinfandel is usually a few bucks cheaper than most other reds.

Another advantage is that zinfandel is easy to grow. Too easy, some say.

Zinfandel grapes, if allowed, will grow wild on vines that crawl over fences and trellises and even grow into bushes on the ground. If allowed to ripen to the max, they can produce so much natural grape sugar they turn out wines with 17 percent alcohol -- compared to 12 or 13 percent for most other grapes -- pushing them into the category of port. The riper zins are often called "jammy" or "tarry." Or "monsters."

Some of California's best zins come from "old vines." You'll see it on the label. Some of these vines were planted 100 years ago or more, and today produce only a few bunches on each massive trunk, but put more body and flavor into each grape and each resulting wine.

Few other grapes can claim this august age. It's because in the 1990s most growers of other grapes turned to a new rootstock on which to grow their grapes. The rootstock turned out to be vulnerable to the grape louse phylloxera, and thousands of acres of vines had to be ripped out and replanted. So today, of course, they're only 20-25 years old.

Zinfandel growers stuck with their old "St. George" rootstock, and thus were spared to reach elegant old age.

Chances are that, if you haven't tried zinfandel, you'll be surprised how nice it is.

So raise a glass of good old red American zinfandel with one hand. And a defiant fist with the other.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

-- 2010 Grgich Hills Estate Zinfandel, Napa Valley (97 percent zinfandel, 3 percent petite sirah; 15.5 percent alcohol): complex aromas and flavors of red plums, citrus and cinnamon, long, powerful finish; \$35.

-- 2011 Freelance Wines "Coup de Grce" Red Wine, Lodi (56 percent "old vines" zinfandel, 21 percent petite sirah, 16 percent petit verdot, 7 percent cabernet franc; 15.5 percent alcohol): hint of oak, aromas and flavors of red raspberries, boysenberries and earth, firm tannins; \$28.

RECOMMENDED

-- 2011 Artezin Wines Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley (99 percent zinfandel, 1 percent petite sirah; 14.2 percent alcohol): rich and full-bodied, with aromas and flavors of red raspberries, spice and milk chocolate; \$17.

-- 2010 Murphy-Goode "Liar's Dice" Zinfandel, Sonoma County (100 percent zinfandel; 15.4 percent alcohol): soft and sweet, with aromas and flavors of black cherries and black coffee; \$21.

-- 2012 Rancho Zabaco Zinfandel, Sonoma Heritage Vines (100 percent zinfandel): aromas and flavors of boysenberries and bitter chocolate, sweet, lush fruit; \$15.

-- 2012 Caricature "Old Vine" Zinfandel, Lodi (14.6 percent alcohol): aromas and flavors of black raspberries and cloves, soft and rich; \$17.

-- 2012 Apothic Wines Red Wine, Calif. (zinfandel, syrah, merlot, cabernet sauvignon; 13.5 percent alcohol): soft and lush, with aromas and flavor of black cherries and cloves; \$14.

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