



**WINE AND FOOD WEDNESDAY**  
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## Wine and Food Wednesday **EXCLUSIVE. New Zinfandels Are Changing The Landscape**

By Stephen Eliot

After a few nice days a week or so back, the rains have returned here to Northern California, and there are concerned murmurs being heard in wine country. There is no question but that things are pretty well stalled in the vineyard, and, as in 2010, the vines are behind schedule...if "schedules", in fact, really exist anymore. I do not like to think about the possibility of another downright difficult vintage like the last one, but my more immediate upset has come from grilling with an umbrella in one hand. I mean, really, is it right that it rained on Memorial Day?

I confess to having fought back by firing up the new Char-Griller, grabbing a few good bottles of Zinfandel and making my own sodden statement that barbecue season had been delayed for long enough. Yes, Zinfandel, but not the swollen, ultra-ripe variety but rather wines of the brighter, zestier kind that were once the norm hereabouts. When made in manner that celebrates fruit instead of overarching ripeness, Zinfandel remains one of the most comfortable mates to classic barbecued fare to be found. Bigger, tannic red wines do not take kindly to overt sweetness and acidity in foods, and, just as Zin made with an eye to structure and restraint is a marvelous foil to tomatoey pastas, so too does it find a most sympathetic partnership to the gamut of tangy sauces that define American barbecue from the Carolinas to Memphis to Kansas City.

Now, in all truth, the bold, ripe versions still abound, but there are a few balanced bottlings that fill the bill, and there are hopeful suggestions that more and more vintners are beginning to hear that a good many of us have wearied of high-octane excess. There is much talk these days about a small group of intrepid, cutting-edge innovators who are redefining California wines and about some "new paradigm" that they herald, but, to me it is déjà vu all over again, and I think that to some extent it is just the same old pendulum swinging back to the center...and hopefully not past. We have seen it before. It is said that everything old is new again, and, from where I stand, the time is right for a long and serious look back to the days when Zinfandel was a wonderfully food-worthy wine. I am encouraged by what I see and what I taste, and, if the generously stuffed, plush bottlings are far from extinction, there are more mannerly wines at every price point that have plenty of good things to say.

Here are six recently reviewed offerings that do just that.

### **91 🌟🌟 SEBASTIANI Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley 2008 \$24.00**

Juicy and focused on the fruitiness of fresh wild berries and sweet spices in the nose and kissed by a dollop of creamy, vanillin oak, this very likeable Zinfandel trades bombast for manners in its aromas and repeats the favor on the palate. Medium-full to full in body and just tannic enough for a useful bit of grip, this one will serve brilliantly today with dishes like pasta Bolognese. It demands little by way of cellaring yet has the depth to hold for a few years and is a great buy at the price.

### **91 🌟🌟 D-CUBED Primitivo Zinfandel Napa Valley 2008 \$25.00**

From its defined, ripe-berry aromas to its well-balanced palate and its insistent, long-lasting finish, this very confident wine hits all the right varietal marks and does so without concessions to overdone ripeness. Its deep and unwavering fruit comes with a trim of sweet oak and mildly briary spice, and its combination of stamina and real reserve puts it on an ageworthy track with five or more years of very rewarding growth ahead.

### **88 🌟 LIMERICK LANE Collins Vineyard. Molly's Block. Zinfandel Russian River Valley 2008 \$30.00**

This fruity, mid-sized wine is never flamboyant but always well-focused with plenty of fresh Zinfandel berries showing all the way through. It is very well-balanced and comparatively light on its feet, and, if not one for fans of big, bombastic red wines, it will please folks who like Zins that drink well with food.

**88 🌸 SEBASTIANI Zinfandel Sonoma County 2008 \$15.00 GOOD VALUE**

Young and keenly focused on ripe blackberry fruitiness with hints of vanilla and a whiff of cola, this medium-full-bodied Zinfandel is lively and even a bit on the pert, zesty side and will make a fine mate to a variety of red-sauced pasta dishes over the next few years. Its price adds to its charms.

**86 CLIF FAMILY The Climber Zinfandel California 2009 \$14.00 GOOD VALUE**

This easy-to-like wine fills the niche as a fruity, mid-sized quaffer that will drink well with a wide number of dishes. It is geared to fresh berries, and Zinfandel is far more apparent here than are its fractions of Cabernet and Syrah. The latter do not contribute appreciable tannins to the mix, and the wine is a good choice for washing down barbecued fare over the next couple of years.

**86 ROSENBLUM Vintner's Cuvée XXXIII Zinfandel California \$12.00 GOOD VALUE**

Decently focused, relatively direct, slightly obvious in its quite ripe blackberry/raspberry preserves fruit, this wine is perhaps not the most dramatic offering to come down the pike, but with fruit, bracing acidity and varietal focus, it rates as wholly priceworthy.

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