

Stephen Tanzer's

Winophilia



A Taste of the IWC

Focus on California zinfandel

Josh Reynolds

Summer weekends will likely find you hovering over—or lurking around—a grill and in need of a red wine that can hold its own alongside burgers, steaks, sausages and overly chatty neighbors. I'd recommend drinking a great zinfandel, which can truly be called America's signature wine. Pedants will correctly point out that zinfandel is of central European origin and is actually known as primitivo in its homeland. But with rare exception all Americans, like zin, came from somewhere else—often changing their names as well!—making the variety an even more appropriate choice for the July 4th weekend of eating and drinking.

While zinfandel is made in a wide range of styles, from firm, austere and Bordeaux-like to decadently rich and high in alcohol, the best versions all exhibit exuberant, even flamboyant berry fruit character. Zin is grown all over California and makes topnotch wines in regions known for world-class pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, syrah . . . in other words, just about everywhere. The best versions can age extremely well, and yet they're rarely forbiddingly tannic in their youth, which means that most of these wines are delicious upon, or soon after, release. Even better, most of the top zins, many of which rival big-name cabernets in terms of power, flavor intensity and complexity, can be found at reasonable prices.

Steve Tanzer and I taste hundreds of zinfandels every year as part of the [International Wine Cellar's](#) coverage of California's best wines. Following are some of the best we've seen in recent months in the under-\$40 price range. All of them earned scores of 90 points or higher in the [IWC](#).

For many veteran wine lovers, **Ridge Vineyards** is *the* defining zin producer and their **2011 Zinfandel Lytton Springs Dry Creek Valley** (\$38) is a stunner. Along with the **Geyserville** bottling, it's their signature zinfandel and it ages wonderfully, if you're patient. Showing intense dark berry and vanilla aromas and a touch of white pepper, it's a sappy, appealingly sweet, and strikingly energetic wine. Aeration brings up floral and mocha nuances that cling impressively on the long spicy, edge-free finish. Ridge's **2011 Zinfandel Ponzo Vineyards Russian River Valley** (\$32) is also excellent and even more approachable, with deep black and blue fruit character and a supple, round texture.

The **Easton 2012 Zinfandel Estate Bottled Shenandoah Valley** (\$35) weighs in at a heady 15.1% alcohol (not uncommon for this variety) but you'd never guess it. A highly perfumed nose combines black cherry, orange zest and sexy high-toned oak spice, which carry onto the palate. Dense, suave and smooth, it delivers intense fruit character and finishes with a fine dusting of tannins and an almost delicate touch for its heft.

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Novy Family Wines makes a range of excellent zins and one of their best this year was the **2012 Zinfandel Carlisle Vineyard Russian River Valley** (\$32). Its assertively perfumed bouquet displays scents of black and blue fruit compote, cola, licorice and Indian spices, with a hint of violet in the background. Round and expansive on the palate, it offers assertive blueberry and cherry-cola flavors, a touch of peppery spices and a smoky nuance that builds on the fruit-driven, supple finish. This big boy is carrying 15.3% alcohol but one only senses it in the wine's plushness and weight. (If you're hunting for a bargain, by the way, Novy's **2012 Zinfandel Russian River Valley** (\$19), which I scored at 89 points, is a delicious value and by zin standards relatively elegant, with vibrant red fruit qualities that hearken to pinot noir.)

The entry-level wine from zinfandel specialist **Carlisle Winery** is made from fruit grown in seven different vineyards and includes bits of several other varieties. The vivid-ruby **2012 Zinfandel Sonoma County** (\$24) boasts an emphatically fruity nose displaying scents of ripe boysenberry, plum and cherry, with a touch of dried rose adding complexity. On the palate, its silky dark berry and floral pastille flavors put on weight with air. This outstanding value finishes with a note of mocha and excellent tannic grip.

With the possible exception of **Ridge Vineyards**, I consider **Ravenswood Winery** to be California's iconic zinfandel producer. You can't really go wrong with any of their six different single-vineyard zin bottlings from 2011, which all retail for \$35, by the way, but the **2011 Zinfandel Belloni Russian River Valley** (\$35) stood out for me for its sexy floral character, focus and depth. Showing powerful black and blue fruit qualities, it possesses lively acidity, which sharpens and lifts the long, youthfully tannic finish. This one will reward a little time in a carafe, or, even better, a few years of rest in a cool, dark place.

May 30th, 2014

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