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Fruit of the Vine: Ahhh, the Zen of Zinfandel

I still remember that afternoon. It was a blazing hot day in July 2009, during the summer of ribs. I had spent all summer perfecting my pork rib dry rub, home made sauce and smoking method, and it was just about perfect. I took the ribs off the grill and let them rest for a moment while I picked out my wine.

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I pulled a Zinfandel off the wine rack that afternoon. When I tasted the juicy, spicy fruit of the wine next to those sweet-hot pork ribs, the world

stopped. The planets aligned. Somewhere far away, dolphins sang. There may have actually been World Peace for just a moment (I know there was certainly peace in my household). It was complete food-wine bliss, one of the “Ultimate Pairings” wine folks talk about and scribble into their journals. I had discovered the Zen of Zin.

Contrary to what many people might think, the slightly sweet, rose-colored “white Zinfandel” is not the primary form this wine takes. Zinfandel is a black-skinned grape that is primarily used to make a robust red wine – a form, which allows the grape to express itself in all its fruity, juicy, spicy glory. The black pepper and “spice box” flavors lurking in its delicious ruby depths have a natural affinity with spicy, salty and smoky foods. This makes Zinfandel my all-time favorite choice for pairing with barbecue in any form.

As with all wines, each growing region will offer a slightly different flavor profile in its Zinfandel. I find that for my personal rib recipe, the huge, jammy, mouth-filling fruit of California’s Paso Robles region is perfect. Lodi is another California region whose hot days make for a nice “fruit-bomb” style that is rib-friendly.

So let’s drink some Zin. At lower price ranges you might try Poizin (Napa) or Gnarly head Old Vine (Lodi), both \$12.99. Renwood runs around \$15.99. Seven Deadly Zins (Lodi) is a popular choice for around \$17.99.

My current weekend “Zin splurge” is Four Vines “Biker” from Paso Robles, \$19.99. Mettler Vineyard also makes a nice, burly, mid-priced Zin for around \$21.99.

If you really want to kick things up a notch, try to lay your hands on some Zinfandel from Ridge Vineyard (Paso Robles) \$33.99, Hendry Block 28 (Napa Valley) \$39.99, or Victor Hugo (Paso

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Robles), in the mid- to high-\$20s. All of these fantastic wines are guaranteed to provide Zen-of-Zin bliss.

I will let you in on a little secret. Every summer is the summer of ribs. And for me, where there are ribs smoking, there will be Zinfandel.

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