

James the Wine Guy

Demystifying Wine

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Zinfandel—an International Wine Varietal—Part I – James Meléndez / James the Wine Guy



I had to say that Part I is a statement about Zinfandel—not that I have never talked about Zinfandel but the continuous unfolding of Zinfandel. This is a drum roll for this wine. Zinfandel has been thought of as “fun” wine and that implication is that it is not a serious red wine. But a wine can be serious and seriously fun. Jancis Robinson wrote in her Oxford Companion to Wine that Zinfandel is an “exotic black grape.” Exotic can mean many things—rare, uncommon or it can even connote something such as a curiosity grape.

If Zinfandel had a French provenance it would be an international grape; Cabernet Sauvignon is thought in the collective as the most noble of all red wines or the first “amongst equals” of all Bordeaux varieties. And looking at most well known French varieties have a head start and many plantings begin in other wine regions for a variety of reasons and amongst them is because these are “known” wine varieties. And thinking about Cabernet Sauvignon it is truly the new kid on the block which rose to prominence—comparing Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel is to look at lineage and how long they have existed

Zinfandel and those that produce it have had to work superbly hard to make it a prominent red grape—and not just a California phenomenon. While Zinfandel almost had an Arnold signature and would have been California’s state grape that loss of that signature was a disappointment; however, maybe that was not a bad thing. Zinfandel has had to also work hard to distance itself from White Zinfandel... and the Bordeaux reds have such equivalent concern.

Zinfandel is an international wine... yes, lot of Zinfandel is produced in California but is also found in other U.S. states as well as South Africa, Australia and it's birth place Croatia and is known as Crljenak Kaštelanski. Sometimes Zinfandel is thought of sometimes all tasting like raisins. But that is an incorrect assumption. Zinfandel like any other red varietal can also have that taste profile if indeed a large portion of the berries turned to raisin. I like to highlight Clay Mauritsen and he mentioned a visiting French wine maker said something to this effect: "Raisin from Cabernet, Merlot or even Zinfandel is a raisin, is a raisin and a raisin" That this affected grape state does profoundly influence the wine at hand and it is through careful sorting that these berries are plucked out and the raising influence is removed.

Zinfandel is a great wine that is often thought of as an entrant red wine and no more. Yet there is a whole spectrum just like in Pinot Noir, Merlot, etc. that are great freeway on-ramps and the freeways themselves. That they can board someone new to red wine and keep them there.

Zinfandel quality and artistry has grown significantly in a short period of time—in the past 10-14 years.

Zinfandel is an ancient grape, and in modernity experiencing world class artistry. Zinfandel specialist wine houses are sourcing world class fruit; having a relationship with their partner vineyard; walk the vineyard to see progress and to air on the side of quality or concerns but more importantly involved partners. Zinfandel sterling notes and vibrancy is the essential nature and with a good growing practices and thoroughly modern techniques let this varietal blossom.

Zinfandel can and will get recognition by being added to more wine lists; consumers have an opportunity to taste these wines and equally importantly start asking for them at their retailer and on-premise establishments they like to frequent. Zinfandel is making the outreach and speaking less about a California phenomenon but more so a red wine grape that makes compelling and easily recognized wines.

¡Salud!

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