

Not Your Daddy's Zins

Are California's Zinfandels the World's Greatest Food Wines?

By Randy Caparoso

A couple of decades ago the country was awash with pink colored “White Zinfandel”; and focusing on the other two “fighting varieties,” Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, most of the mainstream California wineries dropped red Zinfandel from their lineups. This may have been good thing, because all it did was dramatize the resurgence of small producers specializing in gigantic sized red Zinfandels towards the end of the ‘90s. Like Levi’s, leather skirts, tattoos and pierced body parts, certain things don’t go away – they just come back with a vengeance.

But going back even before its pink wine heyday, Zinfandel was *always* a red wine, championed by winemakers in overalls (August Sebastiani) or Western shirts (Louis Martini). The old guys liked their Zinfandel fairly soft and restrained, but with zesty fruit qualities practically begging for tomato sauced spaghetti. But let’s not sell these wines short. It’s important to have good wine for spaghetti; not only that, but also for fettuccine tossed with mushrooms and Parmigiano, or linguine with clams, mussels, tomato, garlic, and earthy, grassy Pecorino. This is where the moderated Zinfandel classics like Louis Martini, Sebastiani, and coastal blends by Ridge Vineyards start to shine. If anything, ever since the days when spaghetti came to be called “pasta,” there hasn’t been enough of these lighter, snappier red Zins to go around.

But let’s face it: as a variety of pure and distinct character different from anything else in the world, Zinfandel really comes into its own when vinified into something big, huge, even humongous. The special characteristics of the grape – the sweet raspberry and blackberry jam, mixed as it often is with exhilarating whiffs of freshly ground pepper, cinnamon, clove, and oak like burning leaves of autumn – do not really become defined unless grapes are picked with enough sugar to reach alcoholic strengths of 14% at the least, and 15% or 16% to be even better.

Let’s look at a one recent classic: the aptly named Earthquake Zinfandels, made by Michael-David Vineyards in Lodi. What does an Earthquake have that most non-Zinfandel reds don’t?

1. A thickly corded musculature of tannin and alcohol (usually close to 16%). To heck with subtlety.
2. A heady nose, beginning with sweetly concentrated blackberry and bing cherry aromas, ripe without being overripe or pruny, underscored by pepper grinder spice and pungent, toasty, sweet oak.
3. A terrific balancing acidity – pushing the natural fruit qualities to the front of the palate – filled out by the wonderful feel of glycerol (a higher alcohol component), giving a velvety, viscous feel, and overall sense of balance despite the wine’s behemoth proportion.

For aficionados of this enthralling style of wine, it’s gratifying to see Lodi’s ancient, fourth or fifth generation farmed vineyards – like that of Michael and David Phillips, Jesse’s Grove, and St. Amant – finally put to good use: turned into red rather than pink wines. Ridge Vineyards, among all others, deserves the credit for keeping the interest in full scaled Zinfandel alive since the 1960s and through the years of pink wine rage; producing an uninterrupted series of single

vineyard bottlings each year, notably from sites planted in the old Italian tradition of field mixing (Zinfandel vines interspersed with grapes like Petite Sirah, Mourvèdre, Carignane and Alicante Bouschet, usually finding their way into Ridge's final blends in varying yet generous proportions).

In recent years, Rosenblum Vineyards, Turley Wine Cellars, Tres Sabores and Carol Shelton have been mining similar sources of old vines up and down the California coast, and are continuing to push the envelope insofar as Zinfandel heat (16%-17% alcohol bottlings not unusual) and intensity. Still others – like Grgich-Hills and Robert Biale in Napa Valley, Ravenswood and Nalle Vineyards in Sonoma, and recently Miraflores in El Dorado – seem to consistently craft Zinfandels of equal parts power and balance.

But are the modern day big Zins good enough for food? I wouldn't argue if you say that beef is always best with Cabernet Sauvignon, but I've been amazed by how well a sturdy, sweetly berryish Zinfandel goes with roasted prime rib bathed in horseradish tinged natural jus. But how about this: thin slices of beef steeped in soy, sugar, sesame, garlic and ginger in the fashion of Japanese, Mongolian and Korean marinades, charcoal grilled or seared on a smoking hot iron, and plopped on steamy white rice. It is, in fact, the spicy, sweet berry concentration of typical big Zins that allow these wines go where no Cabernet Sauvignon ever can on the table.

It's also said that lamb calls for Cabernet Sauvignon, or else classic red Bordeaux. In the late 1970s wineries like Clos du Val, Montevina, and Carneros Creek made a number of positively black, jammy, cinnamon-and-pepper spiced Zinfandels, with pumped up body, oak and tannin; and that's when I first discovered the joys of such wines with legs of lamb caked with sweet mustard, lamb chops grilled on the barbie with chunks of eggplant, and entire racks coming out of the roaster dripping with buttery bread crumbs and slathered with sweet mint jelly. And not just red meats, but also the "other" white meat: almost any variation of pork; from Italian sausages and chorizo to chops pan fried with pungent herbs (like rosemary and *herbes de Provence*) and roasts smothered in wine, herbs, or zesty barbecue sauces. Who says big, bad Zinfandels don't do food well?

But will the big Zinfandels age? Who cares? After years of trying Zinfandels cellared for ten or more years (including one marathon wine/food tasting, involving ten to twenty year old bottles, sitting with Ridge's Paul Draper), I've reached this conclusion: there is nothing more delicious than a good, three to five year old red Zin. After that, I just don't think they get any better (older maybe, but not "better").

In fact, I think I may prefer big Zins right out of the barrel, having gone so far as purchasing full barrels over the years and serving them to my guests completely unbottled, in order to get wildest, most pristine Zinfandel berry taste possible (being a part owner of multiple restaurants gives you that advantage). If anything, it's safer not to lay down big Zinfandels. After eight years even the finest begin to shed the explosive fruitiness that defines the grape.

THE IDEAL ZINFANDEL FOOD MATCHES

A few more remarks on the food possibilities of Zinfandel:

- The zesty fruit quality of moderately scaled (softer tannins and less than 14% alcohol) Zinfandels actually makes it a good candidate for red-wine-with-fish combinations (providing you grill, sauce, or season the fish with Zinfandel friendly methodology).

- For bigger sized Zinfandels (closer to 15% or 16% alcohol), bring on the fattiest or wildest, full flavored meats – venison, boar, buffalo, elk, and maybe even squab or goose – and slather them with the seasonings and spices (including hot chilies, if balanced with ingredients that are mildly sweet, salty, sour, etc.) you like, because Zinfandel’s combination of tannin, acidic zest, and sweetly fruit forward flavors go where few other reds can.
- Variations of earthy tastes such as mustards and mustard greens (as underlying components that help reduce bitter tannins), bell peppers and chile peppers (can heighten grape’s peppery spice), peppercorns and corning (the grape’s “jammy” sensations can handle some salting), garlic and onions (accents the grape’s sweetness), as well as mushrooms and goat cheeses (Zinfandel has just enough zest to balance acidity in Chèvre) all get along famously with Zinfandel’s unique multifaceted profile.
- Marinades in combination with wood or charcoal grilling, smoking and roasting to create caramelized flavors can “sweeten” the briary, berry taste of Zinfandel, and round out its rougher edges.
- Use of sweet/acidic fruits like tomatoes, berries, and cherry can also match the varietal profile and reduce the effect of tannins in young, unruly Zinfandels.
- The aromatic Mediterranean herbs like rosemary, bay leaf, oregano, thyme, sweet basil, marjoram and savory add contrasting notes to Zinfandel fruitiness (but *not* so much fragrant herbs like mint, cilantro, dill and tarragon); arugula, cress, dandelion and other peppery/nutty greens play to the grape’s spiciness; and spare, thoughtful use of star anise, juniper, mace, ginger, caraway, clove, and seeds of anise, poppy and sesame can all work with peppercorns to embellish the sweetly spiced varietal character.
- Plump sausage meats, with black or red peppers and seed spices; especially when used as meat stuffings (or plopped between buns, for that matter).
- As with all fine wine and food matching, avoid extremes (like overdosing with herbs or overly complicated, multiple saucing) and imbalances (especially over-salting with rock salt or seafood stocks, heavy handed sweetening with sugar or fruits, or acidifying with vinegars, etc.). No big, burly red wine is 100% forgiving. In the end, it makes as little sense to detract from a Zinfandel’s obvious charms as it would to clobber a simple dish with a super-sized wine.

About Randy Caparoso



Randy Caparoso has devoted himself to a career managing, judging, speaking, producing and writing about wine since 1978.

As a restaurant professional, Caparoso is best known as a Founding Partner of the Roy's restaurant group, opening over twenty-five of these restaurants from Hawaii to New York between 1988 and 2001. As Roy's former Corporate Wine Director, he was *Santé* magazine's first "Wine & Spirits Professional of the Year" (1998), and was twice named *Restaurant Wine's* "Wine Marketer of the Year (1993 & 1999).

After leaving Roy's, Caparoso produced three vintages of his own wines as sole proprietor of Caparoso Wines LLC, an alternative label specializing in internationally sourced wines crafted specifically for contemporary cuisines and restaurant glass programs. In recent years Caparoso has consulted for restaurants in Colorado, Florida and Tennessee; while also serving as Chef Sommelier of the Five Star/Five Diamond Sea Island resort in Georgia.

Caparoso has repeatedly served as a professional wine judge (L.A. County Fair, New World Wine Competition, Sonoma Harvest Fair, Oregon State Fair, among others), a speaker/panel leader (*Santé* Restaurant Symposium, Society of Wine Educators, Hospice du Rhône, Aspen Wine & Food Festival, Unified Wine & Grape Symposium, Sommelier Summit, and others), as well as national wine list judge (*Santé* Grand Awards).

Since 1981 Caparoso has bylined biweekly newspaper wine columns (*The Honolulu Advertiser*) and served as a contributing editor for numerous industry magazines (such as *Santé*, *Sommelier Journal*, *Practical Winery & Vineyard*, and *Restaurant Hospitality*). Many of his thoughts on food and wine can be gleaned on his home page (randycaparoso.blogspot.com), as well as on Robin Garr's Wine Lover's Page (wineloverspage.com/randysworld).