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## Dry Creek Valley moves up the zinfandel ladder

By [Dave McIntyre](#), Tuesday, March 27, 9:36 AM

California is the pinnacle of American wine. It produces 90 percent of all wine produced in the United States, and its best rival those of any wines in the world. Yet in global terms, California is still a young wine region — evolving in style, influenced by changing preferences of consumers and winemakers.

Case in point: Dry Creek Valley, one of my favorite wine regions to visit, in person or in bottle. It extends northwest from Healdsburg in northern Sonoma County to the dam at Lake Sonoma and beyond into a mountainous, almost primal region known appropriately as Rockpile. The area makes great sauvignon blanc and lots of cabernet sauvignon (though most cab disappears anonymously into Sonoma County blends).

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Dry Creek really is prime country for zinfandel. The climate is hot enough to ripen zin, yet cool enough that the grape — which can produce wines of 16 percent alcohol in hotter regions such as Lodi or Amador — can be moderated in the hands of a careful winemaker. My current favorite zin producers are Dry Creek Vineyards, Mauritson Wines, A. Rafanelli and Quivira.

“There’s a quality renaissance underway in Dry Creek Valley,” says Clay Mauritson, winemaker at Mauritson Wines and Rockpile Winery. Just a few years ago, most Dry Creek Valley grapes were going into wines labeled with other jurisdictions, such as Sonoma County, North Coast or California, he said. Today, economic conditions have forced large wineries to cut back on their grower contracts, which means more growers are producing their own wines.

“We’re transitioning from a grape-growing valley to a wine-making valley, and quality has improved accordingly,” Mauritson says. His family has grown grapes in the valley since 1868 but has become known for winemaking since the 1990s. Mauritson makes wine under the family name and separately as Rockpile Winery using old family vineyard land in that area.

Dry Creek Valley zinfandel has a certain expression that is characteristic of the region. There’s red fruit (think cranberry and raspberry) with a hint of black pepper. Crafting a more detailed description is difficult, because



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styles vary from one winery to the next.

“There’s no real definition of what zinfandel should be, so everyone puts their own stamp on it,” says Rashell “Shelly” Rafanelli-Fehlman, winemaker at her family’s A. Rafanelli winery. She says she aims for “an Old World style” that features moderate alcohol levels and can age well: “At seven years, you begin to see the fruit fade and more earthy flavors emerge.”

Michael Dashe, who has made zinfandel in Dry Creek since 1989 with Ridge Vineyards and since 1996 under his own label, has seen the region’s style move toward higher-alcohol wines and back toward more moderate levels.

“Global warming has had an effect on grape ripening, and in Dry Creek the sugars were getting higher without the flavors getting ripe,” Dashe says. “In my years, there had been a shift to higher- alcohol wines partly because people haven’t been sure how to handle that issue of the grapes getting riper later. Now I think people are dealing with it better and are able to get grapes riper at lower sugar levels. Of course, it helps that the last few years have been cooler, too.”

Dashe’s zinfandels, produced from various vineyard sites in Dry Creek Valley, tend to be more earthy than fruit-forward. This may reflect a European sensibility. Dashe’s wife, Anne, is French and determines the blend of each bottling.

So even with such a quintessentially American wine as zinfandel, we can say, “Vive la difference.”

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