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# The Good Life: Thousands of big cheers for zinfandel

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SAN FRANCISCO – First there's that horrible sound: the crash and clinking of breaking glass.

Then comes the roar, exploding with power and gusto. It comes from 5,000 people cheering in acclamation and endorsement of a dropped wine glass, and in one huge, happy, celebratory bond. That roar, bouncing off windows, walls and a metal roof, lasts maybe five seconds and at its peak sounds like a rocket.

Ah, there's nothing like a sedate and refined wine tasting. And that's yet another reason to love this gathering, the Grand Zinfandel Tasting at ZAP – the four-day tutorial, jamboree and celebration of all things zinfandel. There's nothing sedate about it.

ZAP, short for Zinfandel Advocates & Producers (the group that sponsors it), is like no other wine event in America. The biggest reason for that is the Grand Tasting, which was conducted Saturday in two enormous halls here at Fort Mason.

It had 250-plus wineries pouring 700 wines – all of them zinfandel – for most of the day. By the afternoon, when the general public joined the industry, press, restaurant and winery people making the rounds, there were close to 10,000 zinfandel-crazed, overly congenial, purple-lipped people roaming around.

And by late afternoon, those broken glasses were getting their biggest roars. That was also, not coincidentally, when there were the most broken glasses.

## A favorite, concentrated

One question might be, what do wineries get out of this kind of madness? It's easy to see why the rest of us showed up. It's seriously fun.

The halls are actually those massive, military-style buildings on piers that are maybe 150 yards long and four stories high. Big tables, with wineries and their zin bottles on them, lined all the walls. More long tables were made into islands down the middle, and the wineries were stationed in alphabetical order.

Scattered through both halls were tables with bread, water bottles, crackers and cheese. Really good cheese.

There was no simple way to handle tasting the wines except to dive in. Diving in also gave you a great chance to compare wineries, regions and styles.

"You only have so many weekends to spend in the valley or the foothills," Greg Sabin, a Sacramento writer, told me early in the day. "This lets us cover a lot of ground. The trick is not to plan anything too heavy afterward, 'cause you are gonna leave here looped." (Note that ZAP strenuously endorses cab rides.)

Scott Jones and his wife, two winners in the Bee's ZAP ticket giveaway through [sacwineregion.com](http://sacwineregion.com), had a pretty mainstream reaction to ZAP.

"We had a wonderful time," he said in an e-mail, "but could only sample a small fraction of the great wine on hand before palate crash set in. This will be an annual event for us so we can taste it all."

## **Exposure is the story**

But what's in it for, say, Tom and Beth Jones of Lava Cap Winery in the foothills above Placerville?

"It's the exposure," said Tom, the winemaker there. "People fly in from all over the country. And there's that roar. It's something."

Exposure is a big part of it, for everyone from well-known zin producers like Amador County's Terra d'Oro Winery, which had lines most of the day, to lesser-knowns like Macchia Winery from Lodi, which was getting good grades from tasters at its table.

"Lots of the people seek out good wines here," said Tim Holdener, the winemaker at Macchia. "They base their judgment on what they taste. I think zin people do that more than with any other varietal.

"With some other wines, like cab, people go on reputation, or they're collecting, and they have stories about how they bought wines to save for their daughter's 21st birthday. With zin drinkers, every story starts with drinking the wine."

Holdener also said ZAP gave his winery a chance to stand next to wines from around California and to show that Lodi zinfandels compared well with any of them.

## **Little ol' Lodi shows well**

Lodi wines did show well Saturday. It may have been the surprise appellation in the halls. And as big and crowded as those halls were, word spread through them about individual standouts like we were in some giant game of Rumor.

That was both good and bad news for some wineries, though mostly good, because who doesn't want 10,000 people saying nice things about your wine?

But there was also a downside to popularity.

"I'm blowing through my wine," said Jeff Gaffner, owner and winemaker of the suddenly very popular Saxon Brown Winery of Sonoma. It was still early afternoon. "I guess that's good. This is only my life savings."

One of the big buzzes running through the room was about Klinker Brick Winery from Lodi. I had a half-dozen people recommend its two zins, and particularly its 2006 Old Ghost, a big but complex wine. The crowd grew at that table through the afternoon.

"I love this event," owner Steve Felten said as we were off to one side and out of the rush. "You have some of the best zin lovers in the world here. If you produce a zin, you've gotta be here."

"And if you come a number of years, and you make a good wine, pretty soon people are talking about you, and you get lines. I remember our first year here, we couldn't get anyone to even come to our table."

There was also lots of talk about Perry Creek Winery of Fair Play and its new label, Altitude: 2401, which was exactly what Katie Van Gilder from Perry Creek was hoping for.

"We really wanted to showcase what we're doing now," she said. "We also wanted to help showcase El Dorado County."

As we talked there was a crash, a clinking and a booming roar. We paused for a moment, waiting for the air to stop shaking. "Though," she said, "in the last hour, we're mostly just bartending. The last hour is the price you pay for the rest of the day."

## **Zinfandel and black pepper marinated tri-tip**

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 25 minutes

Serves 4-6

Recipe courtesy [www.zinfandel.org](http://www.zinfandel.org). Why don't you pair it with ... zinfandel.

Note: The prep time does not include the 2-hour marinate time.

### **INGREDIENTS**

4 cups zinfandel, divided use

6 sprigs fresh thyme  
4 sprigs fresh savory  
1 clove garlic  
1 shallot  
6 green cardamom pods  
1 stick cinnamon  
2 cloves  
1 bay leaf  
1 tri-tip roast, about 1 to 1 1/2 pounds  
1 tablespoon coarse ground fresh black pepper  
Sea salt to taste

### **Zinfandel reduction**

1/4 cup honey  
Sea salt to taste

### **INSTRUCTIONS**

Place 2 cups of zinfandel into a saucepan and bring to a boil, remove from the stove, and add the thyme, savory, garlic, shallot, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves and bay leaf. Set aside to cool, allowing the flavors to infuse the zinfandel.

Meanwhile, rub the tri-tip with the coarse ground black pepper. Put the tri-tip in a zipper-type plastic bag. When the marinade has cooled, add it to the tri-tip and seal the bag. Marinate for 2 to 4 hours in the refrigerator.

Place the remaining 2 cups of zinfandel into a saucepan and place on the stove over high heat. Reduce it until just a 1/4 cup remains; add the honey and season to taste with sea salt. Set aside.

Remove the tri-tip from the marinade and season well with sea salt. Place on the hot grill and cook until the desired doneness. The time will vary depending on the size of the tri-tip, the heat of the grill, and the desired doneness of the meat. The last 3 to 5 minutes before the tri-tip is done, brush with the zinfandel and honey reduction. This will give the meat a nice glaze. Be sure

to monitor the heat of the grill, as too high a heat will cause the honey in the glaze to caramelize very quickly.

Allow the tri-tip to rest for at least 10 minutes before slicing. Thinly slice across the grain of the meat. Serve immediately.

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