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## Zinfandel: The Great American Wine

Zeroing in on Zin: the origins of American Zinfandel.

By Ted Scheffler

Although its origins go back to Croatia and, in more recent times, to Italy, I contend that Zinfandel is America's great wine. Yes, California is renowned for its Cabernets and Chardonnays, and Oregon for its Pinot Noir, but Zin ... now that's American. Simply put, we do Zinfandel better than anyone else.

First, a bit of Zin's history. The search for Zinfandel's origins dates back to the 1960s, when a plant pathologist named Austin Goheen observed that Italy's Primitivo grape was very similar to the Zinfandel cultivated in California. It's since been assumed by many that the Zinfandel grapes grown in California were from Italy's Primitivo vines. And indeed, a few years ago, DNA technology allowed plant pathologists to verify that California Zinfandel and Primitivo from Italy were identical clones. But there was still the question of whether Primitivo—and therefore, Zinfandel—was born in Italy.

The answer is no. It turns out that Italy's Primitivo has its origins in Croatia, where it can be traced to a grape called Crljenak Kastelanski. DNA testing recently verified a definitive genetic relationship between Crljenak and Primitivo/Zinfandel. The Zinfandel missing link was found.

Here in the New World, Zinfandel dates back to the 1820s, when it was planted on Long Island. By 1835, Zinfandel was being used in the Boston area as a table grape, and it first pops up as a grape used for making wine in 1847, in John Fisk Allen's *Practical Treatise in the Culture and Treatment of the Grape Vine*. In the 1850s, Zinfandel makes an appearance in California. It's thought that Joseph Osborne might have made the first California Zinfandel wine after he planted Zin at his Oak Knoll Vineyard. A Zin boom followed, and by the end of the 1800s, Zinfandel was the most common wine grape variety in California.

But, Zin's popularity ebbed and flowed. Its demise as a result of Prohibition is well-documented, and by the mid-1900s, it had all but disappeared from California. Enter Bob Trinchero, who put Zinfandel back on the map in 1972 when, at his Sutter Home Winery, he experimented with draining some of the juice from his red wines before fermentation in order to pump up the tannins and skin contact of the wine. Not wanting to waste the excess juice, he fermented it separately and christened the pinkish-colored wine "White Zinfandel." Thus began the comeback of the term "Zinfandel," albeit in a bastardized form.

Well, perhaps in reaction to the offensive White Zin, serious wine drinkers and wine makers decided to take back their Zinfandel; in the decade from 1985 to 1995, the production of real Zinfandel more than doubled in California. Zinfandel was back! And, for years, California Zinfandel was in a league of its own. Americans were rightly proud of being the biggest and best producers of Zinfandel, worldwide.

