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Tasting Highlights: California Zinfandel

**10 excellent reds from new and familiar faces
alike who continue to impress with the
potentially outstanding 2006 vintage**

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Posted: Monday, November 03, 2008

Zinfandel lovers haven't had it this good in a long time. The 2006 vintages of Napa and Sonoma Zin are potentially outstanding, and in this week's selection of new releases you'll find both new wineries that are starting off strong and familiar wineries with track records for excellence.

Topping the list are two Zinfandels from Four Vines, a Paso Robles-based winery that is consistently among the top producers. Winemaker Christian Tietje likes big wines that are loaded with personality. The Sophisticate bottling from Sonoma County is the more stylish of the two; the Biker from Paso Robles has a touch of Mourvèdre in the blend and is for thrill seekers.

Mazzocco winemaker Antoine Favero has released the first of his 2006s and demonstrates that his 2005 Zinfandels were not a fluke.

Barbieri is a familiar name to fans of old-vine Zinfandel. Planted in 1906, the Russian River vineyard was made popular by De Loach Vineyards in the 1990s and now winemaker Adam Lee of Novy has access to some of those gnarly old vines. Lee only made 71 cases of the 2006 Barbieri Vineyard, so act fast.

Michael Chiarello is best known as a TV chef, but his Chiarello Family winery consistently makes Zins that are rich yet elegantly food-friendly. The winemaker is Thomas Brown, who also

runs the cellar at Schrader and Outpost. Giana Vineyard, named for Chiarello's youngest daughter, produces low yields.

Dutcher Crossing is a family-run winery that doesn't get much play outside Sonoma County, but with the help of veteran winemaker Kerry Damskey, the Healdsburg winery has produced an impressive 2006 with its Dry Creek Valley Proprietor's Reserve. It's a blend of four vineyards and has 8 percent Petite Sirah for added kick.

Ravenswood has had its share of ups and downs with Zinfandel over the years, but the 2006 single-vineyard wines are a noticeable step up from the 2004 and 2005 vintages, particularly the Teldeschi (Dry Creek Valley) and Belloni (Russian River Valley) bottlings.

FOUR VINES Zinfandel Paso Robles Biker 2006 Score: 92 | \$25

Pedal-to-the-metal Zinfandel, with wild berry and toasty licorice aromas and full-bodied, ripe and exotic huckleberry, peppered beef and loam flavors that build toward a tight, rustic finish. Best from 2010 through 2014. 3,500 cases made. —*T.F.*

FOUR VINES Zinfandel Sonoma County The Sophisticate 2006 Score: 92 | \$25

This big, zesty Zinfandel offers wild berry, cracked pepper and sage aromas, with ripe but balanced and appealingly layered plum, licorice and smoky meat flavors that linger on the finish. Drink now through 2013. 1,200 cases made. —*T.F.*

NOVY Zinfandel Russian River Valley Barbieri Vineyard 2006 Score: 92 | \$33

Complex and full-bodied, yet elegantly styled, with loamy plum and licorice aromas and intense, layered blueberry, smoky meat and cracked pepper flavors that slowly take on tannins on the long finish. Drink now through 2013. 71 cases made. —*T.F.*

CHIARELLO FAMILY Zinfandel Napa Valley Giana 2006 Score: 91 | \$35

Jammy and ripe, but remains balanced and elegant, with boysenberry and toasty vanilla aromas and complex, supple black cherry, smoky sage and cracked pepper flavors. Hint of tannins grip the finish. Drink now through 2013. 550 cases made. —*T.F.*

DUTCHER CROSSING Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Proprietor's Reserve 2006 Score: 91 | \$27

Offers classic Zinfandel aromas of wild berry, underbrush and licorice, with complex yet rustic black cherry, cracked pepper and sage flavors that build toward zesty tannins on the finish. Drink now through 2014. 459 cases made. —*T.F.*

MAZZOCCO Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley West Dry Creek 2006 Score: 91 | \$32

Zesty, ripe and a bit on the wild side, with boysenberry and toasty licorice aromas and full-bodied, ultrajammy plum, pepper and sage flavors. Drink now through 2013. 150 cases made. —*T.F.*

MAURITSON Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Grower's Reserve 2005 Score: 88 | \$35

Offers enticing smoky and briary black cherry aromas and zesty, medium-bodied wild berry, cracked pepper and licorice notes that finish with slightly rustic tannins. Drink now through 2013. 257 cases made. —*T.F.*

MAZZOCCO Zinfandel Alexander Valley Stone 2006 Score: 88 | \$29

Superripe and zesty, with wild berry and licorice aromas and jammy black raspberry, smoky cedar and pepper flavors that finish with some rustic tannins and heat. Drink now through 2014. 600 cases made. —*T.F.*

RAVENSWOOD Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Teldeschi 2006 Score: 88 | \$35

Aromas of black raspberry and spice lead to zesty, appealing rustic flavors of cherry, licorice and toasty dill. Drink now through 2012. 4,745 cases made. —*T.F.*

RAVENSWOOD Zinfandel Russian River Valley Belloni 2006 Score: 88 | \$35

This is an old-school Sonoma Zinfandel that's easy to like, offering cherry, cedar and underbrush aromas and layered, nicely structured boysenberry, licorice and pepper flavors that finish with zesty tannins. Drink now through 2014. 1,205 cases made. —*T.F.*