

The ZAP "Experience" 2015

IS ZINFANDEL ON A
NEW PARADIGM SHIFT,
MORE APPEALING TO
SOMMELIERS?

story and photos by Randy Caparoso



Lodi Native and other bottles of Zinfandel at the tasting.



ZAP Trade and Media Panelists (left to right): Tim Fish (Wine Spectator), Lulu McAllister (NOPA San Francisco), Wilfred Wong (wine.com) and author Randy Caparoso (The SOMM Journal).

This past January 28–31, Zinfandel Advocates & Producers (aka ZAP) held its 24th full-scale “Experience” in San Francisco’s Presidio. This year’s theme was “Zinfandel is a rising star . . . reach out and grab it.”

Zinfandel, of course, has been a major varietal category since producers such as Ridge Vineyards in the ‘60s and ‘70s, Ravenswood and Rosenblum in the ‘80s and Robert Biale and Turley in the ‘90s began fueling consumer mania for the grape’s more obvious features, such as big, lush, jammy fruitiness.

At the same time, Zinfandel specialists have always been acutely aware that Zinfandel has never really caught on with the on-premise trade—particularly sommeliers in high-end restaurants, hotels and resorts. In turn, much of the trade has never made any bones about its perception of the category’s shortcomings, particularly the fact that most commercial Zinfandels almost seem to be crafted for lowest-common-denominator tastes. Measured by girth rather than balance, Zinfandel tends to be over-oaked, overripe, often annoyingly sweet and rarely capable of expressing subtleties of terroir or origin. Zinfandel, in other words, tastes too much like “Zinfandel.”

Hence, ZAP’s “rising star” mantra during the group’s 2015 gathering. The thinking that, as popular as it is, Zinfandel still has a way to go toward garnering respect in some quarters. With The SOMM Journal serving as co-sponsor—and with me, as the publication’s Editor-at-Large, performing duties as organizer and moderator—ZAP put on a panel discussion/tasting strictly for the media and trade on the current “state of Zinfandel,” plus five sommelier/winemaker workshops focused on terroir-related qualities distinguishing Zinfandels from lesser known regions (namely Lodi, the Sierra Foothills, Contra Costa, Lake County, Mendocino and the Rockpile AVA).

The question was dangled at both events: How close is Zinfandel coming to being *simpatico* with, say, the



The ZAP–SOMM Journal Sommelier & Winemaker Terroir Workshop (left to right): Andy Pestoni (Jelly Jar Wines), Chris Sawyer (Sawyer Sommelier Consulting) and Rich Parducci (McNab Ridge Winery).

needs of sommeliers, or any wine lover expecting more from the category than simple, brutal varietal character?

Wilfred Wong—a longtime San Francisco–based retail merchandiser, now employed by wine.com as “Chief Storyteller”—sat on the trade and media panel, and had this to say: “I happen to believe that Zinfandel is still on the rise, after four decades of tremendous growth. For the restaurant trade, it has always been one of the most food versatile varietals out there, and most recently producers have been finding a sweet spot between power and balance. Many of the wines tasted at this year’s ZAP events showed incredible finesse, proving that Zinfandel *can* appeal to more sophisticated tastes.”

Lulu McAllister, Wine Director at cutting-edge San Francisco restaurant NOPA, also addressed the trade and media with Wong, seconding his emotion regarding Zinfandel’s role on the table. According to McAllister, “I have Zinfandels on my list with the structure to handle pork chops and lightness to match fish and vegetable dishes. I think it’s the fact that many of the best Zinfandels come from ancient, field-crushed plantings—vineyards mixed with Carignan, Petite Sirah, Mataro and other grapes—that is giving us all the more reason to highlight it in the restaurant.”

Inevitably there are sobering nays mixed in with optimistic yeas. Ron Washam, well known in the blogosphere as the “Hosemaster of Wine,” has worked with Zinfandel as a full-time sommelier for over 30 years in the L.A. area, before recently putting himself “out to pasture” in Sonoma County. With his imitable phraseology, Washam tells us, “Every six or seven years some writer has declared ‘Zinfandel is about to be a break out.’ Zinfandel has seen so many outbreaks, it’s the measles of wine varieties.”

Adds Washam, “I did walk away from ZAP thinking that there are fewer Turley impersonators than there were a few years ago, including Turley. One of the prettiest Zinfandels I tasted was the 2013 Turley ‘Vineyard 101’—nothing resembling the brutish Turleys of yesteryears. Overall, I found a lot more Zinfandels that seemed focused on pretty varietal aromatics, and fewer that smelled like they should have that pretty Sun-Maid lady on the label. I think that will ultimately serve the varietal well.”

Christopher Sawyee—former Wine Director of Sonoma’s Carneros Bistro & Wine Bar, now working on a book on a recent period in the California wine industry—was quite a bit more positive about the indicators at this year’s ZAP. “To

me,” says Sawyer, “this year represents a huge awakening for people who thought all Zinfandels were big, sweet and high in alcohol. Instead, we’re starting to see a paradigm shift towards a new breed of young, adventurous winemakers who are putting more emphasis on elegance and food-friendliness—especially those working with ancient, heritage plantings from less familiar regions, such as Lodi, El Dorado, Mendocino, Lake and Contra Costa counties.”

Jamie Harding, Wine Director at Sausalito’s Cavallo Point, cites experimental projects like Lodi Native (visit lodinative.com), which focuses on native yeast-fermented Zinfandels aged strictly in neutral oak in order to craft delicate, perfumed, almost Pinot Noir-like styles. Says Harding, “Projects like Lodi Native are only going to help producers find Zinfandel’s true expression—the grape seems capable of a lot more nuance and structure than most people expect.”

Robert Volz of Portland’s Pour Wine Bar & Bistro tells us, “I traveled all the way from Oregon to attend ZAP because Zinfandel is my second-favorite grape, after Pinot Noir.” Like Harding, Volz was struck by the Lodi Native Zinfandels, in which he found “lower alcohol levels and higher organic elements, much like the earthy aspects of a Burgundian or Oregon Pinot Noir.”



Participants (left to right): David Glancy, MS (San Francisco Wine School), Jeff Cohn (Jeff Cohn Cellars) and Clay Mauritson (Mauritson Family Winery).

All the same, Washam remains skeptical: “Will the sommeliers of the world go retro and suddenly decide Zinfandel is the Next Big Deal? I have my doubts. Restraint may be the trend right now, but I have the feeling that the big fruit bombs of the past will make their inevitable comeback. Hey, I love Zinfandel, always have—I just don’t think it has to be the next Pinot Noir. It should be fine being ‘good ol’ Zin!’” ■■