

# THE GRAY REPORT

BEST BLOGGER/ONLINE WINE WRITER (IN THE WORLD!): ROEDERER AWARD 2013

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## Drought ends the tastiest asparagus: is Zinfandel next?

Though we buy from the same farm, Los Angeles Times food editor Russ Parsons and I have opposing tastes in asparagus. Parsons likes extra-thick jumbo asparagus from Zuckerman Farm, which he steams and dresses with olive oil and lemon juice.



Ordinary asparagus from Zuckerman Family Farm. Courtesy [Summer Tomato](#)

I like Zuckerman's extra-thin asparagus, which I either pan-fry, steam or grill for less than a minute -- sometimes less than 30 seconds -- so that it's still crisp. I eat it either with salt (sometimes smoked salt), black bean sauce or fried garlic, and I like to make the whole batch at once so I can eat the crisp cold leftovers.

To me, the extra-thin asparagus has more flavor and better texture. I cannot stand mushy asparagus, the way I was served it as a kid. I didn't think I could ever like asparagus until somebody else ordered a revelatory dish of crisp, cold, super-garlicky asparagus at dim sum at [Ton Kiang](#). For a year I would only eat asparagus there, until I discovered Zuckerman Farm's extra-thin.

Now, because of California's ongoing drought, I may never have it again. What's more, the asparagus experience makes me worry about old-vine Zinfandel.

Roscoe Zuckerman is a fourth-generation family farmer in Stockton. [CUESA did a nice slideshow](#) about his operation. You can learn a lot about asparagus from it, including

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Roscoe Zuckerman. Courtesy Tory Putnam/CUESA

that jumbo asparagus is more tender and extra-thin is more fibrous. Precisely!

Both styles of extreme asparagus require plenty of water, so Russ and I might both be out of our favorite soon. But Russ has a few weeks on me, because extra-thick jumbo asparagus comes from vigorous young plants, and was still in the Alemany farmers' market on Saturday.

My favorite extra-thin asparagus, however, is gone

for this year at least, and maybe for good: a victim of California's drought.

I used to think asparagus was extra-thin because it was picked young, but I was wrong. Turns out extra-thin asparagus is the product of older, less productive plants.

Doesn't that sound like old grapevines? Putting their energy into fewer, smaller, more concentrated berries?

The Zuckerman staffer at the Alemany market told me that the farm isn't getting enough water for it to give any to its plants that produce extra-thin asparagus. The farm has to triage. The less productive old-vine asparagus has been cut off.

One might try to argue that this won't happen to old-vine Zinfandel because its grapes fetch a price premium. Yet so did Zuckerman's extra-thin asparagus: I paid \$4 per bunch for it, compared to \$3.50 for a larger bunch of ordinary asparagus. That's at least 14% more, not counting the size of the bundles; I'd say the true premium was closer to 30% more.

How much, really, is the price premium paid for old-vine Zinfandel? Zinfandel growers were paid on average only \$624 a ton in 2014. That's well below the average for all California red wine grapes, which was \$892.

Moreover, Zinfandel grape prices dropped 4% in 2014 while average red wine grape prices went up 5%.

If a farmer has limited water sources, and has to triage something, is it going to be the oldest vines, or the most productive and valuable vines?

I wish I had bought several more bundles of Zuckerman's extra thin asparagus when it

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was there for the taking. I hope we're not saying that a couple years from now about old-vine Zinfandel.

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