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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2013

ZAP 2013: A Tale of Four Tasters

The sun was shining and the mood was upbeat in San Francisco this Saturday, with many wine lovers in their 49ers jerseys attending the Grand Tasting at the **22nd annual Zinfandel Advocates & Producers (ZAP) Festival**.

My goal for this daunting array of zinfandel tastings was to find out what appealed to a variety of palates—since there is just too much wine for any one person to taste, and even the most refined palate can easily be dulled by consecutive tastings, I relied instead on the judgments of four experienced tasters with strikingly different preferences. My husband, Michael, has a



discerning palate that appreciates complex wines with darker fruit (every year he incants *Chateau-neuf-du-Pape* on the way to ZAP); our friends Rich (aka “Fruit Man”) and Diane are drawn to big fruity wines and sweetness, respectively. I was most interested in the new presenters this year, hoping to find that new and exciting winery to recommend to readers and friends. Armed with our ZAP glasses and last year’s ZAP tasting notes, we entered the Grand Tasting eager to experience as much as we could of the literally hundreds of wines being poured—barrel samples, reserves, estate wines—and hoping to find some new favorites to share with others.

We began at the end of the alphabetically-arranged hall with our annual round of past favorites—Turley, Terra d’Oro, and the Wilson

WHAT WE’RE DRINKING

A Burgundy salmon recipe that went wrong was redeemed only by a Paradise Ridge Pinot Noir....more on that excursion later as we prepare for our trip to France.

Trader Joe’s Paso Robles zin at \$5.99 was the perfect, unpretentious accompaniment to a thyme-spiced beef stew.

Today, in the aftermath of ZAP, ginger ale and Squirt sound pretty good....

As Scarlett put it, “Tomorrow is another day.”

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Family Wineries (which include Matrix and DeLorimier), drawing up together after each tasting to compare notes. Hmm. **Turley**, always a sure bet for quality, somehow seemed less stellar than usual, the 2011 Juvenile a bit hot and minerally for my taste. The 2011 Hayne Vineyard was better, but not exactly a value at \$75. Everyone agreed, however, on the high quality of the **Terra d'Oro** 2010 Home Vineyard, fruity with a deep, rich flavor we all could enjoy, and the 2010 Amador County at \$16 topped the low-end price category. Diane gave her thumbs up to their Zinfandel Port, with its 10% residual sugars, before moving on to the 2010 Bramble Creek by **Wilson Winery & Vineyards**, which captured her attention with its light body and jammy flavor. Meanwhile, I strayed next door to ZAP newcomer **Story Wine**, where I preferred the minerally yet fruity 2010 Picnic Hill, made from 120 year-old vines, to the drier 2010 Quartz Vineyard. Michael, meanwhile, thoughtfully swished the **Storybook Mountain** 2010 Mayacamas in his cheeks—little fruit, but a pleasing dry heat. Another newcomer, **Vigilance Winery & Vineyard** attracted me with two reasonably priced and food-friendly blends—the bright, fruit-forward 2010 Cimmarron with 44% zinfandel and the softer Dalliance with 46% zinfandel, at \$24.99 and \$19.99 respectively.

Onto the three R's—Rosenblum, R&B, and Rancho Zabaco. Rich appreciated the dark fruit of the **Rosenblum** 2009 Monte Rosso reserve, while Diane's sweeter palate preferred the velvety 2009 Rockpile. At **Rancho Zabaco**, Helen poured the single vineyard 2008 Toreador, which we all liked, despite its higher price: at \$35, it had more body and fruit than the \$24 2011 Dry Creek. Diane and I went on to try both "Zydeco" blends at **R&B Cellars**—I preferred the kick of stronger tannins in the 2009 Napa Valley, making me hungry for steak, while the softer fruit of the 2010 Contra Costa brought chocolate to Diane's thoughts.

Food—we turned to cleanse our palates, expecting the usual sumptuous array of cheeses and fruits to complement the half-sized baguettes they pass out at the entrance. But no—empty food stations met our searching glances, and we soon learned that the food was not to be served until noon. Frown. One delightful outcome of this disappointment was our discovery of the **Cabot Creamery Cooperative**, which had a table on the concourse, well-stocked with sharp cheddar, regular cheddar, and horseradish. The cheddars were superbly smooth and pungent, among the best I have ever tasted, but for lovers of heat and flavor, the horseradish outdistanced the others by far.

Two interesting tastings followed—at **Sobon Estates** and **Seghesio**

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ABOUT ME



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King, and *Jane Austen's Lovers* (forthcoming).

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Family Vineyards. Made from 105 year-old vines, Sobon's 2010 Estate Lubenko from Fiddletown was still a little sharp and tannic, and though we all liked the spicy complexity of the 2010 Cougar Hill and the dark, warm 2010 Rocky Top, all the Sobon wines seemed to finish with greater acidity than usual. Seghesio's 2011 Sonoma County at \$24 is a real steal, but the 2011 Old Vines, due to be released in June, is plummy and complex, and at \$35 well worth the extra money.

At nearby **Soda Rock Wineries**, we all remarked on the thin body of both 2010 Wentworth wines, finding the reserve particularly dusty, but Michael pointed out the complexity of the Primitivo. As we moved on to **Opolo Vineyards**, he observed that the 2011 Mountain, which Rich, Diane, and I all prized for its blackberry jam, was a little flabby and unexciting—he preferred the solid fruit of the 2011 Reserve.

We approached the center of the alphabet anticipating some of our favorite Sonoma wineries from Healdsburg and Geyserville. At **Limerick Lane Cellars**, we met up with new owner Jake Bilbro of Marietta. Limerick has much to offer—the spicy fruit of the 2010 Russian River and the drier heat of the 2010 Dry Creek Valley proved promising additions to Marietta's excellent library of wines. At **Matrix**, Michael's preference for complexity pointed him to the 2010 Boschetti Reserve, more structured and seamless in comparison to the fruitier 2010 Bacigalupi Reserve, both at \$42. At **Mauritson Family Winery**, Michael and I both found the 2011 Dry Creek flavorful, despite a lack of fruit and a sharp finish, but we pulled back from the perfume of the 2011 Rockpile Ridge, which struck Michael as "bubble gummy." The 2010 Maple and the 2010 Stone at **Mazzocco Winery**, one of our winery "finds" this fall, pleased all four of us—the Stone solid and smooth with dark fruit, the Maple warmer with good body.

Moving to the first part of the alphabet, we each found something we liked: Michael again endorsed **Edmeades Winery** for their 2010 Fiddletown, a good value for \$22, and the balanced 2010 Perli, while Rich also liked the 2009 Piffero Vineyard. Diane gravitated to **Bella Vineyards & Wine Caves**, where she especially enjoyed the 2010 Lily Hill Estate, and I wound up my tour of new entrants at **Dane Cellars**, where the fruit of the 2009 Los Chamizal got my attention. At **DeLorimier**, Diane preferred the 2010 Stone, while Michael and I both chose the 2010 Hill for its heat and depth. One final stop at **Black Sears Estate Wine** reminded us all that some zinfandels cry savagely out for meat—the black pepper called for a steak so insistently that it drove us from this excellent tasting to an

equally outstanding lunch at **Zuni Café**, where we talked over the wines we had tasted, appreciating the craft of winemaking and the pleasure of sharing a tradition with good friends.

Recommendations from Our Tasters (*wines under \$25 in italics*)

Diane (sweeter fruit): DeLorimier 2010 Stone (\$32); R&B 2009 “Zydeco” (\$30); Mauritson Westphall Ridge (\$39); Opolo Mountain (\$29); *Rancho Zabaco 2011 Sonoma Heritage (\$15)*

Eve (new entrants to ZAP): Dane 2009 Loz Chamizal (\$36); Story Wine 2010 Picnic Hill (\$35); *Bonterra 2010 Mendocino (\$16)*; *Vigilance 2010 Dalliance (\$19.99)*

Michael (complex, dark fruit): Terra d’Oro 2010 Home Ranch (\$30); Sbragia 2009 Promessa (\$34); Rancho Zabacco 2008 Toreador (\$); Opolo 2011 Reserve (\$43); Matrix 2010 Boscheti Reserve (\$42); *Sobon 2010 Fiddletown (\$22)*, *Sobon 2009 ReZerve (\$24)*; *Terra d’Oro 2010 (\$16)*

Rich (“Fruit Man”: fruit forward, red fruit): Edmeades 2009 Piffero (\$30); Matrix 2010 Bacigalupi (\$42); Opolo 2011 Mountain (\$29); Rancho Zabaco 2008 Toreador (?); *Rancho Zabaco Sonoma Heritage (\$15)*

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