

ZAP Zinfandel festival matures at age 20

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Seghesio Family Vineyard 2009 Zinfandel pairs well with artisan cheese and salami The winery will be participating in the ZAP tasting in San Francisco this year.

Zinfandel is flamboyant, showy, a diva in a bottle.

But the diva hasn't always played to a crowd. Two decades ago, at the first Zinfandel Advocate and Producers (ZAP) Tasting in San Francisco, only 50 people showed up. But this year on Jan. 29, at the ZAP Tasting's 20-year milestone, organizers expect roughly 10,000 zin enthusiasts to arrive at Fort Mason with an eager palate.

"This tasting, along with ZAP's road shows, has certainly raised the profile of quality zinfandel in the U.S. and abroad," said Joel Peterson, founder and head winemaker at Sonoma's Ravenswood Winery. "Red zinfandel used to be tilted to lower-priced wines. In 1998, nearly 70 percent of red zin was below \$8 a bottle. Now 60% is over \$8 and 29% is over \$15 a bottle."

The ZAP festival is the largest tasting in America devoted to one varietal, and the spotlight on zin reveals that winemakers these days are producing a more food-friendly version of zinfandel, one lower in alcohol content and slightly less overpowering.

"I don't think that we really want to change zinfandel's reputation as a full-bodied, delicious, assertive, flavorful red wine," Peterson said. "But these qualities do not disqualify it as a great food partner, any more than a good conversationalist's talking ability disqualifies that person as a good dinner guest."

As Pete Seghesio, CEO of Healdsburg's Seghesio Winery, put it: "I see zin moving back from the edge.

"While there are some that are still way over the top in terms of alcohol, I think the leading producers are focusing on lower pounds per vine, more thinning, more raisin walks pre-harvest..."

When the alcohol is in check, these producers say zin is a strong food match to grilled meats, Asian foods, and Mediterranean and Italian cuisine.

Seghesio said zin is a practical pairing for everyday living.

"How much salmon and duck do we all eat," he observed, "compared to burgers, Creole cuisine, spicy Asian, sausages and barbecue?"

Yet, he added, zin's weakness as a versatile wine is its alcohol level, because if food is too spicy it will accentuate the alcohol.

"To me it's 'heat plus heat equals more heat,'" he said. "For example, barbecue is a great pairing to zin, but if the rub or sauce have too much cayenne or red pepper it works against zin."

Balance, producers say, is the key.

"I think there is a movement back towards some iota of restraint in the benchmark zinfandels being produced; Turley, Biale, and Carlisle all come to mind," said Morgan Twain-Peterson, who produces Sonoma's Bedrock wines. "This is not to say that they are not honoring the natural richness in fruit of the variety, but they are leavening it with better acidities, more fruit freshness and structure, without relying on residual sugar and bad oak."

For many, the gentler pinot noir is seen as the ultimate match for food, particularly the Burgundian style of pinot, earthy, tangy, with good acidity. Is zinfandel in pinot's shadow?

"If you are talking great Burgundy, I think pinot is a more natural compliment to food. The more feral and savory inflections, combined with acidity and tannin, somewhat demand food," Twain-Peterson said. "Many Californian examples of pinot, though, more closely resemble zinfandel in regards to weighty fruit and alcohol, which I think makes it a harder match for food."

Ultimately, Twain-Peterson said, it's apples and oranges.

"I think that zinfandel and pinot noir should be considered in a different trope," he said. "They are distinct varieties and the beauty of wine is that there is one for every occasion."

American consumers are catching on to the ways food and wine taste good together - or don't taste good together. Vintner Barry Collier, of Healdsburg's Collier Falls, for one, wants zinfandel to have a place at the table.

“Perhaps all wineries producing zin should offer recipes on their sites that fit the bill,” he joked, “or find a Hollywood producer to make a movie like “Sideways” (the 2004 film that helped make pinot noir a hit) -- about zin.”

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