

# Zinfandel deserves a little respect

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Great zinfandel at Ridge's Lytton Springs vineyard start with 100-year-old vines and having other grape varieties in the field.

Bill Zacharkiw / Special to Montreal Gazette



**One night last summer as I was cooking some T-Bones on the barbecue for a few friends, and I chose to serve a bottle of Sonoma winery Seghesio's 2006 Old Vines Zinfandel. This was a gang of wine people, with tastes in wine that were even more Eurocentric than my own.**

"You have to be kidding me," said one of the haters. "You even have this in your cellar?"

I told him to shut up and just try it. To everyone's surprise but my own, the wine was exceptional. Full of fruit, dry, lengthy and with notes of mushrooms and herbs. The pairing with the grilled steak was exceptional.

But I get it. I too have a love/hate relationship with the zinfandel grape. The hate is mostly due to White Zinfandel, the pink coloured and most often super sweet wine that is passed off as a rosé. It's more of a boozy sip sack, but whatever. Then there are the over-ripened, and again, sweet versions of the red wine variety that are simply disappointing.

My love is for those "zins," like that Seghesio, that speak to the long-standing history and tradition of the grape in California. The wines are dry, they are gorging with fruit and show a certain honest rusticity that, when I drink them, give me a sense I am drinking something that is truly unique. I have been a fan for a while now, and have a number of other zins in my cellar, from Ridge, Peter Franus, Bill Easton and Ravenswood.

While in pockets of the state they do a great job with a number of grape varieties — from pinot noir and chardonnay, to the Bordeaux and Rhone varieties — I have always felt that it is zin that is the "California grape."

So when I sat down with John Olney, head winemaker at Ridge Winery's Lytton Springs vineyard in Sonoma, the first thing out of my mouth was that I thought zinfandel was the most authentic grape in California. I have said that to many winemakers, and most have stared me down with a look of derision. But Olney simply said, "I agree with you."

When I asked Olney "why?" his response was that "like grenache in Europe, it gives you a good reflection of the area that it is grown in." And it is grown everywhere in California. Part of this reason was that up until the 1980s, it was the state's most planted grape. Presently, it ranks in third place.

It's history in California dates back to the original plantings in the 1850s when Italian immigrants settled in the Sonoma region. This led to the belief that it was the same grape as the Italian primitivo, which is grown throughout the equally warm regions of southern Italy. DNA fingerprinting has confirmed that zinfandel carries the same genetics as primitivo, however, both zin and primitivo may have come from an ancient Croatian variety called crljenak kaštelanski.

While the grape's Italian connection is interesting, its how those immigrants planted their vineyards that is the real legacy. It also explains why Ridge's zinfandels, and especially the Lytton Springs bottling, is one of my favourite red wines.

The Lytton Springs vineyard, like Ridge's other notable zin vineyard, Geyserville, are what is called field blends. Zinfandel makes up around 70% of the vines in each vineyard, and many of these vines are over 100 years old, the balance is made up by two other grapes, carignane and petit sirrah. Lytton has more carignane and Geyserville more petite sirrah.

When I asked Olney if these were just haphazard plantings, he replied that he believed that the percentages of other grapes were quite methodical, that they knew what they were doing. While zinfandel has a reputation for being a powerful wine, the reality is that it normally doesn't produce a dark coloured or tannic wine. It does, however, produce a lot of sugar. So if it has gained this reputation for being a big red wine, it is due more to its high alcohol levels and winemakers' propensity for loading it up with lots of new oak.

Olney said that the secret behind the success and quality of both Geyserville and Lytton Springs is due to what carignane and petit sirrah bring to the blend, which are tannins and acidity. All three grapes ripen around the same time, and are crushed and vinified together. Olney has even tried to duplicate this by blending these three grapes together from different vineyards and the results were not as good. "The wines lacked complexity," was his comment.

Tasting through the lineup at Seghesio, my favourite wines were from those vineyards that were co-planted with the other grape varieties. Seghesio makes zin from a number of different vineyard sources, and each showed a slightly different take on the classic zinfandel flavour profile. When done right, as Olney had suggested, zinfandel can be a great reflection on individual vineyards.

Outside of Sonoma, there also exists great zinfandel that is equally unique. The common denominator seems to be vine age. I mentioned Peter Franus, whose grapes are sourced from the Brandlin vineyard in Napa Valley's Mount Veeder appellation. These vines are closing in on 100 years of age, and the style is touch more delicate and more aromatic.

Bill Easton's high-end zinfandel, is sourced with grapes from 80-100 year old vines from the Rinaldi vineyard in Amador county, and is much darker fruited and powerful, but with a the necessary restraint.

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All great wines, all zin. So it's time that wine folks start to take zinfandel a touch more seriously. Why they don't might be because maybe wineries need to do this as well. You can see in today's suggestions that many of the wines are expensive, and that's because many of the entry level wines simply are too sweet, and rely too much on oak to add the necessary complexity.

These are wines that will never rival cabernet sauvignon for refinement, but that's not the point. Like my dinner companions found out on that warm summer evening, their rich fruit and complexity, especially when aged a few years, can make the ideal wine choice.

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