

# Wine Spectator

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## Zinfandel's Renaissance

**A group of dedicated young winemakers is ready to take California's quintessential wine from cult status to the big time**

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The mustard flowers shine in the afternoon sun as Morgan Twain-Peterson walks through Bedrock Vineyard in Sonoma Valley. He seems to know the 33-acre old-vine section down to the inch. First planted in 1888, it's largely Zinfandel, but Twain-Peterson points out Carignane, Grand Noir, Castets and dozens of other obscure grape types. "I've individually mapped every vine in this vineyard," Twain-Peterson says, "all 16,279 of them."

Just a few years ago, no one would have bothered to analyze the DNA makeup of an old Zinfandel vineyard. Compared with pedigreed grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, Zinfandel was considered California's poor stepchild. The sort of attention to detail in the vineyard that goes into producing a great bottle of \$100 Cabernet just didn't make economic sense for a \$25 Zinfandel, even if it offered high quality.

Instead, Zin is a wine that has survived based on its fervent cult following, powered by those who favor its open-knit and spice-filled red- and black-fruit flavors, its jammy quality and its expression of place. However, one of Zinfandel's strengths—that it can be made in a wide range of styles—is also a weakness. Quality can vary significantly among producers and from vintage to vintage, and consumers sometimes aren't sure what they'll find in the bottle—a sleek claret style, a Port wannabe, or something in between.

Yet over the past decade or so, Zinfandel has made impressive quality strides that have helped bring definition and focus to this distinctly Californian wine. Twain-Peterson is one of a new generation of winemakers who are poised to power Zinfandel to a long-deserved mainstream revival. Twain-Peterson's comrades-in-arms are Mike Officer of Carlisle Winery and Tegan Passalacqua of Turley Wine Cellars, but there are other likeminded winemakers too, such as Clay Mauritson of Mauritson Wines, Jordan Fiorentini of Epoch Estate Wines, and Thomas Brown of Black Sears and Outpost. They join the likes of Seghesio, Ridge, Robert Biale and other stalwarts devoted to making great Zinfandel.

There's no wine that is more quintessentially Californian than Zinfandel. It thrives throughout the state but is at its best in Sonoma and Napa, with Paso Robles and the Sierra Foothills increasingly challenging that dominance.

Zinfandel quality has been on the upswing, with a string of eight successful growing seasons from 2005 to 2012 reinforced by overall improvements in vineyard management. It's in the vineyard, not the winery, where Zin has been making the greatest advances, and that's saying a lot, as it can be a tricky grape to grow. It produces a large crop if allowed, but then the resulting wines are ordinary. Ripening can also be wildly uneven, with a single bunch containing everything from hard, green grapes to shriveled raisins. "It takes way more vineyard work than any other variety I deal with," says Brown, known for making Schrader Cabernets and Rivers-Marie Pinot Noirs. "It's intense."

The origins of Zin were a mystery until recently. It was believed to have arrived from the East Coast around 1850 with the coming of the California Gold Rush adventurers. Because of its bold fruit, it was embraced by Italian immigrant farmers who were keen to replicate the hearty reds made back home. By the turn of the 20th century, it was planted extensively



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through California, mostly intermingled with other grapes like Petite Sirah and Carignane in what is commonly called a field blend.

Zinfandel's true identity only recently came into focus through research spearheaded by grapevine geneticist Carole Meredith of the University of California, Davis. DNA tests now confirm that Zinfandel is Tribidrag, an ancient grape from Croatia that is considered one of the 13 "founder grapes," the ancestors of today's noble varieties.

While many Zin vineyards were lost to Prohibition, some remained, with the white Zin craze of the 1980s serving to preserve them yet longer. The lifespan of a Zinfandel vine is impressive. Most grapevines are productive for 30 or 40 years at best, but a Zin vine can produce wine well beyond its 100th birthday. As it is, Zinfandel remains the third most-widely planted wine grape in California, behind only Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay.

Zinfandel had early champions in wineries such as Rosenblum, Storybook Mountain, Ridge and Ravenswood, while a new generation of winemakers in the 1990s rediscovered old Zin vineyards and the distinctive wines that they were capable of producing.

In a food and wine culture increasingly infatuated with authenticity, old-vine Zin fits right in. The old vines themselves are fascinating; bent and crusted with bark, they grow in bushy fields instead of in orderly rows. The recently established Historic Vineyard Society has dedicated itself to documenting hundreds of these antique vineyards.

"It seems like Zinfandel is no longer considered a second-class citizen," says Mike Officer. Indeed, with his Carlisle Zins, Officer has been one of the leaders of the cause. Since his first release with the 1998 vintage, his Zinfandels have rarely scored below 90 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale. Twain-Peterson, who is the son of Ravenswood Zin guru Joel Peterson, has enjoyed a similarly good track record at Bedrock since his first vintage in 2007.

Stylistically, Zinfandel has seen pendulum swings over the years, and the latest surge in quality follows a period from the late 1990s to the early 2000s when many wines were ultraripe. Larry Turley gained a following by cranking up the volume on Zinfandel, and many producers tried to replicate that bold and ripe style. Not every winery or vineyard was up to the challenge, and what began as Turley's attempt to fine-tune Zinfandel in the vineyard became a game of ripeness one-upmanship that even Turley fell prey to.

In fairness, winemakers can't always be sure what a Zin vineyard ultimately can do until they push the envelope on flavor and aromatic extraction, and often a very warm year like 2004 will let them know when they've gone too far. By the time the 2004s arrived, even Zinfandel fanatics were wondering if enough was enough. "The big, ripe wines are very polarizing," Twain-Peterson says. "They created a lot of vehemence."

As with any wine, it's all about balance with Zinfandel. Few wines packing 16 percent or 17 percent alcohol demand you drink more than a glass. "If you start to chase trends, you begin to lose what's special about Zinfandel," says Clay Mauritson, whose family has been growing grapes in Sonoma County since 1868. "We've certainly seen a pullback from some of the overripe, homogenous styles." It hasn't hurt that 2010 and 2011 were relatively cool growing seasons, which prompted winemakers to explore the possibilities of lower-alcohol Zins.

Winegrowers have learned much about how and where to grow Zinfandel in the past 10 to 15 years. New growing areas like the mountainous Rockpile region in Sonoma County are changing attitudes about style and quality. And winemakers such as Jordan Fiorentini of Epoch Estate in Paso Robles are finding success using different Zin clones, such as Primitivo.

Another key is balancing the size of the crop on each vine, and that isn't easy with Zin. "It really boils down to crop load and when you pick," says Orin Swift winemaker Dave Phinney, the man behind the popular Zin blend The Prisoner. If the crop is trimmed too severely as a way of intensifying flavors, ripening can accelerate too quickly. Excessive watering can dilute fruit intensity, so many growers are limiting irrigation or even eliminating it. Green grapes, which can add vegetal character, and shriveled grapes, which can add raisiny aromas and flavors, are increasingly weeded out. The health of soil has become paramount, and adding compost and cover crops to boost nutrients is becoming more routine.

"We're farming [Zinfandel sites] as carefully and lovingly as the finest Pinot or Cabernet vineyards," Officer says. "They're getting the full-tilt boogie."

Winemakers like Officer know that not every vineyard is created equal. A vineyard like Papera Ranch in Russian River Valley can maintain an almost natural balance, producing 15.5 percent alcohol Zins that still pack great acidity, while a

similarly ripe wine from another vineyard might taste sweet or flabby.

Along with harvesting slightly earlier, most Zinfandel makers are also dialing back on the amount of new oak used in barrel aging. "If you over-oak, you're not working toward that goal of showing the vineyard and the vintage, and the same is true with alcohol," Officer says.

Already, people are taking notice. Winemakers say sommeliers and wine buyers who once shied away from Zinfandel are increasingly giving it another chance. "It seems like people are back to focusing on site as opposed to style," Brown says. "The wines just seem to be more refined and focused than they used to be."

The future of Zinfandel is far from set. The economics of high-intensity farming are still being played out. Maintaining old vineyards in particular is expensive, including the constant need to replace vines that die off. The wines' prices are creeping up, but will the market support an increasing number of \$50 or \$60 bottles of Zinfandel?

The profit margin may never match Napa Cabernet's, but Zinfandel vintners are cutting their own path to financial success. "We certainly don't live high on the hog," Officer says. "You have to have a real love for Zinfandel, and as long as you do, you make it work."

Twain-Peterson believes the same: Zinfandel is a wine that demands a passionate winemaker. "Zinfandel can be an incredibly soulful wine," he says, as he walks among the vines at Bedrock. "When I make Syrah, my inspiration is Côte-Rôtie. With Zinfandel, my inspiration is right here with these vines. It's the wine that makes California unique."

- [California's Major Zinfandel Districts](#) (*in PDF Format*)