

Zinfandel That Pairs Well With Food



Even ‘serious’ Zinfandels are notoriously jammy and tough to pair with food. Here, a few that are not only delicious alone but complement a meal as well

By Lettie Teague Dec. 5, 2014 10:01 a.m. ET

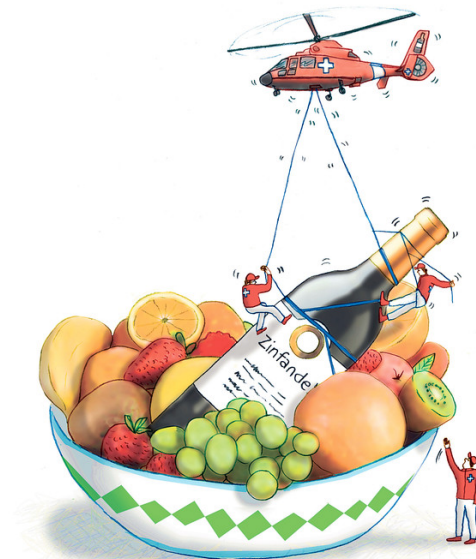
HOW CAN A GRAPE be both cultish and commonplace? Grown so successfully in California that it is the state’s third most-planted variety and yet referred to, even by its own producers, as a niche wine? I’m referring to the Zinfandel grape, of course.

Lauded as the most American of grapes (maybe because it’s the only important variety we didn’t get from the French), Zinfandel has been grown in this country, primarily in California, for almost 200 years. Grape historians date its arrival to the 1820s, when it was brought from Austria first to Long Island and later to California.

Zinfandel was an immediate hit among winemakers, thanks to its vigorous and hardy nature. But even the more serious Zinfandels never gained as much traction among oenophiles as did wines made from that later arrival, Cabernet Sauvignon. A good Zinfandel can be quite juicy and delicious, but it’s also bigger and gutsier and less refined than Cabernet.

The biggest obstacle to its wider appreciation among wine drinkers, however, may be its flavor profile: *blackberry*, *sweet cherry*, *boysenberry*, *spice* and *plum sauce* are all words used to describe Zinfandel. I’ve even seen *fruitcake*, *white chocolate* and *fig pudding* cited.

These flavors are not only very particular and powerful but exceedingly difficult to match with food. What do you pair with a fig pudding-esque wine—except perhaps fig pudding itself? Then there’s the question of alcohol. Zinfandel grown in hot regions can get very ripe, and that ripeness translates into sugar, which is transformed into alcohol—sometimes more than 16%. This can make food pairing that much more fraught, as



high levels of alcohol can dominate everything else.

My wine-drinking friends must feel the same way since I can't recall a single instance when I was served a Zinfandel at someone's home. Even my friend who lives in the Zin-centric Dry Creek Valley of Sonoma isn't a fan—though she'd like to keep that to herself. "Don't mention my name in your column," she said.

Perhaps she's afraid she'll get a call from a member of Zinfandel Advocates and Producers, or ZAP, a California-based nonprofit group of approximately 2,000 Zinfandel producers and wine drinkers devoted to the grape. (Surprisingly enough, the organization includes many more of the latter than the former.)

What's the appeal? According to ZAP Executive Director Rebecca Robinson, it's the authenticity of Zinfandel, alluding to the grape's long history in California and its many old vineyards.

When the topic is Zinfandel, words such as *devoted* and *cult* crop up quite often. "Zinfandel drinkers do see themselves as members of a cult," acknowledged Dave Prumak of Robert Biale Vineyards, in Napa Valley. Mr. Prumak is the co-founder and director of marketing at the Biale winery, which produces no fewer than 14 single-vineyard and old-vine Zinfandels.

Why did Mr. Prumak think Zinfandel was still such a niche wine? He replied in three words: "pink, plonk and punch." In other words: the preponderance of white Zinfandel (which is pink and generally mediocre) and cheap Zinfandel have skewed the identity of the grape. And all those fruit-bowl descriptors, even when applied to quality Zinfandel, scare drinkers away.

Yet many of those descriptors are written by the winemakers themselves, according to Chad Watkins, wine-club manager at Gary's Wines in New Jersey. And those adjectives didn't seem particularly helpful in moving the wine. Mr. Watkins noted that, in his stores, Zinfandel sales are down about 6% this year over last.

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Mr. Watkins's observation was echoed by other wine merchants, including Trey Beffa, vice president and domestic-wine buyer of K&L Wines, which has three stores in California. "Zinfandel is not a growing category; it's really just a category that's there," said Mr. Beffa, who stocks 75 Zinfandels in the K&L stores, of which only a few—including Seghesio and Ridge—do well.

Mr. Watkins thought Zinfandel's popularity was hampered by the difficulty of pairing the wine with food, although he noted that some producers had confessed they make their wines even sweeter and more alcoholic by adding 1% to 2% of Port.

This certainly didn't seem like a move that would solve Zinfandel's image problem. And it is definitely at odds with the work of winemakers striving to produce more versatile Zinfandels, especially in cooler climates such as the Russian River Valley of Sonoma.

When I asked Russian River-based winemaker Jeff Stewart at Hartford Family Winery if he'd heard about the Port-sweetening technique, he replied it wasn't something practiced in his home region. "We don't want that sweet character," he said. "We want elegance."

The Russian River Valley is far better known for its Pinot Noir than its Zinfandel, but some of the valley's Zins can actually be mistaken for Pinots. Indeed, Mr. Stewart saw parallels between the two grapes grown in the region. "They're both wines with good acidity that pair well with food," he said. He added that a former employee coined the term "Zinonoir" to describe the region's more-elegant cool-climate Zinfandel.

The Russian River Valley was one of many regions represented in my tasting of 20-some Zinfandels. Others included the Dry Creek Valley, Napa, Lodi and Paso Robles, as well as a few wines simply labeled "California," meaning they were blends of grapes from all over the state.

The prices of the Zinfandels I purchased ranged from the \$9 Bogle Old Vine to a single-vineyard wine from Limerick Lane Cellars (the 2011 Rocky Knoll) in the Russian River, just over \$100. Most of my selections were in the \$20 to \$30 range. That seems to be the sweet spot for more serious Zinfandel.

I decided not to taste just the wines but to pair them with food, considered the grape's greatest challenge. I focused on dishes substantial enough to match or at least to accommodate the richness of the wines—which meant I consumed a fair amount of beef, pasta and pork.

The most flexible wines by far were from the Russian River Valley—including the rich but beautifully balanced (if rather pricey, at \$75) 2011 Limerick Lane Russian River and the bright, juicy 2012 Hartford Family Winery (\$30). The 2011 Hendry Blocks 7 & 22 from Napa, the 2012 Seghesio Sonoma and the 2011 Ridge Lytton Springs (all between \$25 and \$33) were also quite drinkable, with bright fruit and crisp acidity—and slightly more-manageable levels of alcohol between 14.4% and 15.5%.

A few Zinfandels were delicious on their own but less felicitous with food, thanks to their powerful flavors and high alcohol levels: most notably the super ripe 2012 Robert Biale Black Chicken Zinfandel (\$45) and the bold 2012 Turley Old Vines (\$53), made of grapes from all over the state. And the others? Well, many were simply too far over the top, with flavors of boysenberry, cherry candy and, yes, even fig pudding.

Tasting the Zinfandels with food definitely helped determine the wines that are most flexible at the table. It also helped belie the stereotype of the grape as a cherry-pie wine, although the process did result in an excess pound or two for certain members of the tasting committee. Maybe it was the pork or maybe it was the pasta or maybe it was that additional 2% Port.



Oenophile: Five Zinfandels to imbibe with a meal or enjoy by themselves

From left: 2012 Seghesio Family Vineyards Zinfandel Sonoma, 2011 Limerick Lane Cellars Zinfandel Russian River Valley, 2012 Hartford Family Winery Zinfandel Russian River Valley, 2011 Ridge Vineyards Zinfandel Lytton Springs and 2011 Hendry Zinfandel Blocks 7 & 22 F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal (5)

2012 Seghesio Family Vineyards Zinfandel Sonoma \$25

The Seghesio family began growing Zinfandel in northern Sonoma almost 120 years ago. Today a wide range of wines appear under the Seghesio label, but their Sonoma Zinfandel is a flagship of sorts, a well-balanced, slightly briary wine with notes of red currant.

2011 Limerick Lane Cellars Zinfandel Russian River Valley \$76

Located in the northern corner of the Russian River Valley, the Limerick Lane estate is home to great old-vine Zinfandel vineyards. The result is a wine of remarkable concentration and richness possessed of great elegance and polish. It isn't cheap, to be sure, but it is first-class Zinfandel.

2012 Hartford Family Winery Zinfandel Russian River Valley \$30

Best known as a top producer of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, Hartford Family also turns out a few very good Zinfandels, including this bright and supple wine. With its lively acidity and a comparatively modest alcohol level, this bottle might be best called a "Zinonoir."

2011 Ridge Vineyards Zinfandel Lytton Springs \$33

Ridge Vineyards and winemaker Paul Draper are equally famous for Zinfandel and Cabernet. This wine is 82% Zinfandel blended with Rhône varieties from very old vines in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley. Marked by olive, spice and dark fruit, it's a subtle take on Zinfandel and a wine that historically has aged very well.

2011 Hendry Zinfandel Blocks 7 & 22 \$30

The Hendry family has been growing grapes in Napa for seven decades. Their 2011 Zinfandel, taken from two vineyard blocks planted 20 years apart, is an aromatically explosive wine—lots of ripe cherry and spice—but there's plenty of acidity and fine grained tannins. An excellent wine with food.