

4 iconic, delicious Zindandels to try



Dave DeSimone | Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2018, 12:03 a.m.

Enjoy a full-range of fruity, yet beautifully balanced California Zinfandels.

Mid-September marks a critical moment for zinfandel, the granddaddy of California's red wine grapes. If growers allow zinfandel clusters to linger on the vines until October, then sugar levels continue rising as the grapes soak up California's glorious autumn sun. More sugar means more potential alcohol.

During the '90s and early 2000s, alcohol levels mounted alarmingly in a majority of zinfandels. Many wines attained alcohol by volume in the upper-15 percent range. Some even tipped over 16 percent. More alcohol became the norm especially in so-called "cult" zinfandels.

Monster alcohol, overripe fruit and pronounced oak influences found favor with prominent wine critics. They typically gave "bigger" wines higher numerical ratings on the 100-point rating scales then dominating consumer attentions. More recently as 100-point scales have become less prominent, sanity has slowly returned.

Increasingly, California producers pick zinfandel earlier and throttle back to craft more balanced bottles. Drinkability and compatibility with food have regained importance. The movement represents a return to the zinfandel traditions of the mid-20th century when most wines comfortably landed between 12.5 to 14.5 percent alcohol by volume.

The nonprofit association "Zinfandel Advocates Producers," or "ZAP," for short, leads the push for appreciating zinfandels as table wines. ZAP offers a terrific place to learn more at Zinfandel.org. For a really deep-dive, attend the "Zinfandel Experience" to be held in 2019 from Jan. 17-19 in San Francisco. Meanwhile, enjoy these delicious "iconic" zins:

- **2014 Alexander Valley Vineyards, "Sin Zin" Zinfandel, Alexander Valley, Calif.** (Luxury Code: 78880; Chairman's Selection On Sale: \$10.99): "Sin Zin" started in the late 1970s as a fun wine that the winery's owner, the Wetzel family, drank at home and gave out to friends. After offering a few cases for sale in 1980 at the winery, the easy-drinking style and whimsical name attracted enthusiastic customers who have supported "Sin Zin" ever since. This delightful, 100 percent-zinfandel offers juicy red raspberry fruit and a touch of brambly tannins. Fresh acidity lifts the wine beautifully. Pair it with grilled burgers. **Highly Recommended.**

• **N.V. Marietta Cellars, “Old Vine Red” Lot No. 66, California** (Luxury 73499; \$13.99): This easy-drinking red embodies the tradition of beautifully balanced California “field blends.” It mixes zinfandel with healthy dollops of petite sirah and other red grapes in a juicy, fresh style that invites one sip after another. Elegant, silky tannins add just enough structure to complement a hearty dish of pasta with red sauce and meatballs. **Highly Recommended.**

• **2015 Pedroncelli Winery, “Mother Clone” Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley, Calif.** (Available online from Saratoga Wine Exchange — saratogawine.com — for \$14.28 plus shipping). Since the early 20th century, the Pedroncelli family has made its home in Sonoma County’s Dry Creek Valley, arguably zinfandel’s best “terroir.” Today Julie Pedroncelli St. John carries on the family tradition of crafting fruity, yet highly drinkable zins with enticing black pepper notes. The wine offers ripe, dark fruit with sweet blackberry flavors and spiciness. Fresh acidity and fine tannins combine to balance the fruity finish. Pair it with grilled rib-eye steaks. **Highly Recommended.**

• **2016 Ridge Vineyards, “East Bench” Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley, Calif. :** (Luxury 75644; \$31.99): Ridge Vineyards’ famed winemaker Paul Draper oversaw 47 vintages before retiring in 2016. He championed a “pre-industrial” approach relying on nature and native yeasts, rather than technology and winemaking tricks. “Find intense, flavorful grapes; intrude upon the process only when necessary; draw the fruit’s distinctive character and richness into the wine,” Draper wrote in succinctly summarizing his philosophy. The minimalist approach shines in this delicious, beautiful zin. Current winemaker John Olney crafted the wine with forward raspberry, blackberry and black licorice aromas. The wine has ample concentration with ripe dark plum and fig flavors balanced by fresh acidity and elegant “brambly” tannins. If you drink this wine now, decant it for several hours. Otherwise hold it in the cellar for a few years. **Recommended.**

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