



Zinfandel truly “had the back” of the California wine world like no other variety.

On the face of it the comment was simple enough. “Those old timers had it figured out. I can see why they liked Zinfandel.” I was at the Zinfandel Tasting at Fort Mason in January talking with Susan Marks, co-owner and co-winemaker at Cedarville Vineyard in Fairplay in the Sierra Foothills.

“Zinfandel is a beautifully adapted grape to California,” she continued, “Syrah throws out tons of canopy and sucks water out of the ground. Zinfandel is a very water-thrifty grape.” I was curious and wanted to hear more of her comments. She continued, Zinfandel needs a long, warm growing season to ripen, especially through the fall, and even then it often requires hand sorting because it has such uneven ripening. The long days of warm California sunshine are perfect for that. But even when it’s ripe Zinfandel retains naturally high acidity and a low pH. That makes it relatively microbiologically stable and requires less worry than other varieties. “That must have helped those old guys,” she finished. “It would have been a mess to have a wine with a high pH.”

And then she made one last comment that really made me think. “Do you ever hear anyone talking about old vine Cabernet?”

As I walked away I couldn’t help but wonder if that was true? Certainly as I looked around there was no shortage of old vine Zin being poured all around the Festival. But I also knew there was a lot of grapevine diversity in the early days of California viticulture. Why do we hear so



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Old Vine Zinfandel

By Rod Byers

much about old vine Zin and so little about old vine anything else?

There is no legal definition what “Old Vine” means. The consensus of producers I talked to suggested that 50 years was a good benchmark. I asked Jim Wolpert, the viticultural extension specialist at U.C. Davis and the prime mover of the Heritage Zinfandel Project in Oakville, California and he chuckled saying that answering that could only cause trouble. He did explain that physiologically by the time a vine was 25 or 30 years old it was starting to get into old vine territory. He thought that by then the vine had truly settled into its site. He continued, saying that 50 years definitely counted, that by then the vine had been through every

cycle and was pretty much on self-sustaining auto pilot.

Tim Holdener who specializes in small lots of old vine Zinfandel for Macchia Wines in Lodi agreed. “At a certain age they become self-regulating. They will only throw out as much fruit as the vine can naturally ripen.”

Given that 50-year benchmark then anything planted before 1960 would now count as old vine. But that’s not really how our imagination about old vine Zinfandel works. We naturally roll to the ancient vineyards. We want to hear about 1905. That’s what makes our hearts beat. That’s what makes history in a glass.

The story of Zinfandel’s introduction to California in the early 1850s has been well documented by wine historian Charles Sullivan. Jim Wolpert of U.C. Davis elaborated, “Zinfandel was identified early on as a high quality varietal, especially against the Mission grape.” Prior to the Gold Rush the Mission grape, planted by the Franciscan friars through their Mission syndicate, had been California’s dominant grape. But in just a few short years Zinfandel was quickly recognized as California’s best grape. Victor Fauré, Mariano Vallejo’s French winemaker, gave it his blessing, declaring it tasted like good French claret. In 1859 Zinfandel won top honors at the California State Fair. Zinfandel was the favored grape of the California vineyard boom in the 1880s.

Few wineries can track Zinfandel’s story better than Seghesio Winery. Edoardo Seghesio was part of the wave of Italian immigrants at the end of the 19th century. Leaving his family’s vineyards in northern Italy, he gravitated to the Italian Swiss Colony in northern Sonoma County. In 1895 he purchased land in Alexander Valley and planted Zinfandel. Why Zinfandel? “Wine was the water on their table,” Cathy Seghesio explained. They wanted something that was hearty,



Old Vine Zinfandel *continued...*

flavorful, fruity and ready to drink without long ageing. “It needed to taste good.” Zinfandel fit the bill better than anything else.

But planting Zinfandel was more than just a wild shot in the dark. “Italian Swiss Colony had acres and acres of trial vineyards. Edoardo worked there as a winemaker and had access to all their research,” Cathy said. California was just emerging from the phylloxera epidemic of the 1890s and among other things Italian Swiss Colony was doing rootstock research. Edoardo planted his vineyard on the St. George rootstock. The Seghesio’s have been growing phylloxera-free Zinfandel on that site ever since.

Typically a grapevine’s productivity starts to decline around 30-35 years of age. At the end of prohibition Seghesio’s grapes would have been about 35 years old, just the time you might consider replanting. But Cathy Seghesio explained, “The family didn’t want to spend the money to replant.” Besides, there was no money to spend on upgrades.

One of the unintended consequences of prohibition was the vineyard boom of the 1920s. Because of increased demand for homemade wine acreage more than doubled and prices soared from \$10-\$25 a ton to a high of \$80-\$100 a ton. Both grape prices and acreage peaked at levels that took decades to match after re-

peal. With sagging demand and paltry prices there was little incentive to plant anything over the next several decades. It wasn’t until the 1970s that there were any signs of reversal.

Still Zinfandel fared better than most. It was one of the few California wines to be bottled under its own name at a time when most wine was bottled as mixed red jug wine. Jim Rickards, owner of J Rickards Winery, farms a century old Zinfandel vineyard in Alexander Valley. “Most of the old vineyards are Zin because of the Italians who not only made wine commercially but also for themselves and their families. They often kept a block of their old stuff because they liked it better for their own wine.”

Zinfandel was by far the most popular variety but there are other old vine vineyards around. Cline Cellars continues to farm and produce wine from 100-year old Carignan and Mourvedre from vineyards in Contra Costa County. Scott Harvey mentioned a 100 year-old Petite Sirah vineyard across the street from him in Napa.

Jim Rickards describes his vineyard as being a typical of the day. Old vine Zinfandel vineyards were usually a blend of grapes. “It was what we call a field blend. Old vine Zin vineyards were planted that way in those days up to prohibition. It has 80% Zin, 10% Petite

Sirah, 5% Carignan, 4% Matero, 1% Alicante Bouschet.”

But what about Cabernet, where’s the Cab? Jim Wolpert explained that the Bordeaux varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc all suffer from “canker diseases” like Eutypa that are fungal attacks caused by pruning wounds. “We start to see it at age 10 or 12. By 25 it is really evident and the vines need to be replaced. Zinfandel doesn’t get it.”

So Susan Marks had it right all along. Those old guys were onto a good thing. Not only does Zinfandel make great tasting wine, but it’s capable of doing it year, after year, after year, for years. And the icing on the cake, given proper handling, the flavors improve as the vine gets older.

Old vine Zin is history in a glass. Throughout the entire 20th century Zinfandel truly “had the back” of the California wine world like no other variety. No other grape spanned that century and continually reflected the changing face of California wine better than Zinfandel. It’s more than just history in a glass; it’s our history, in our glass.

Thanks to Rod Byers, our contributing writer. He is a certified wine educator and has been writing about wine for 20 years.