



Living In Zinfanland

In Search Of Zinfandel

By Rod Byers

The modern California wine renaissance dates back to the last third of the 20th century. It seems unimaginable today but back then we used to stay up into the night discussing whether California wines could ever be as good as French wines. French wines were the standard against which all other wines were measured. As California wines blossomed in the 1970s winemakers looked at the iconic wines of France, Cabernet from Bordeaux and Pinot Noir or Chardonnay from Burgundy as the targets to aim for. We could measure our progress by comparing our wines to theirs.

But what about Zinfandel? Back then it didn't exist anywhere in the known viticultural world except California. Without any force of tradition guiding it there was no target to shoot at. It was up to Californian winemakers to create their own vision.

Paradoxically, the good news and the bad news about Zinfandel was the same news. The good news was that Zinfandel made delicious, fruity, expressive wines. Plus it was versatile. It could be produced in a variety of styles from light and fruity to full-bodied and bold. The bad news was that because there were so many different styles you never knew what to expect. By its nature Zinfandel is a fairly large, thin-skinned grape with a high ratio of juice to skin. Without some type of extra manipulation it doesn't produce the high tannin levels that naturally occur

in Cabernet Sauvignon. Still, there was no shortage of muscle-bound, brawny Zinfandels in the early market place.

Longevity was considered a necessary credential in the early struggle for status. The consensus at the time was that tannin insured a long life so you needed to bulk up to be famous. As early as the late 1960s Sutter Home Winery started getting attention with some bold Zinfandels produced from Deaver Vineyards, putting Amador County on the map in the process. Sutter Home was purposely bleeding off some of the juice before fermentation, intensifying their wines by decreasing the juice to skin ratio. Petite Sirah, used as a blending grape, was another technique for increasing both color and tannin.

Even more critical was Zinfandel's habit of very uneven ripening of the grape clusters. Each year, as harvest approaches, within any single cluster you can see unripe, green berries, plump and juicy ripe berries and shriveled raisins. If you pick at traditional red wine levels, about 23 brix, there could be too many unripe berries. If you wait to get the clusters really ripe the sugars levels could easily float past 26 brix. Once the clusters are crushed and soaking, depending on the amount of raisined berries, the sugar content in the juice could jump several more points. As Lee Sobon of Sobon Estate in Amador explained, "We used to pick Cab at 23 and get 12.5% alcohol. We picked Zin at 23 and got 13.5%." Higher alcohol levels have always been a part of Zinfandel's signature.

Winemaking has become more sophisticated since the 1970s. Now with the span of a few decades of experience making Zinfandel under their belts I wondered how, if at all, have winemakers adapted? I went looking for a few winemakers who have a long history with

Zinfandel to see how things might have changed.

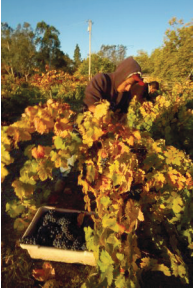
I could think of no better place to start than with Ken Deaver of Deaver Vineyards in the Shenandoah Valley in Amador County. Ken's grandfather planted their original 14-acre Zinfandel vineyard in the 1890s. Ken started taking an active role in the family vineyard in the 1960s including planting new vines from cuttings taken from the original vineyard. As he explained it, in so many ways it duplicated exactly how the original vineyard would have been planted 70 years earlier.

"We planted it ourselves on its own rootstock," Deaver explained. "It was head pruned and dry farmed, there was no irrigation and no trellising. But the important thing was we planted the roots 15 or 16 inches into the ground, deep enough so they could tap into the moisture stored in the subsoil. They wouldn't have survived without that."

Greg Boeger of Boeger Winery lives a few miles down the road in El Dorado County. In 1972 he purchased the old Lombardo Ranch, originally farmstead-ed during the Gold Rush. The original house, wine cellar and distillery were still standing as well as a derelict Zinfandel vineyard that dated back to 1886. Boeger nursed it back to health and produced his original Zinfandels from those vines. "We made it in the old Italian way, quite ripe, usually 26 brix. We took what the vines gave us, crushed the grapes and fermented them dry. It was pretty simple." Did you ferment it on the stems, I wondered. "No, not quite that old of an old-Italian style," he laughed. "At least we took the stems off."

Those were the simple, early beginnings when California cork-finished varietal wines were a novelty. Until then

continued on next page



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the majority of wines produced in California were either jug wines or fortified.

Deaver Vineyards expanded from the original 14-acre vineyard, eventually building up to 300 hundred-acres. Being firmly old school, they expanded with more head pruned vines. In 1977 Deaver was replacing some vines with nursery-grown resistant rootstock. 1977 was also the second year of a very severe drought. The new rootstocks were much shorter than his own cuttings that he was used to planting and he knew the shallow roots couldn't get down to the moisture in the subsoil and wouldn't survive. They were forced to dig a well and for the first time ever, irrigated the vines. That they were continuing with head pruned vines was an increasing rarity and in modern California dry farming was all but a thing of the past.

When asked about changes, Greg Boeger also pointed to the vineyard. "That's where I felt the biggest changes came from. In the early '90s I started paying much more attention to little things. I realized the key to making better Zin in the winery was to bring in better grapes from the vineyard." He focused more on canopy management and balanced vines and most importantly, reduced the size of each cluster cutting off what he referred to as "the shoulder" eliminating about 25% of the cluster. "That promoted much more even ripening."

Lee Sobon made his first Zin at Shenandoah Vineyards in Amador County in 1977. Typically he fermented it hot, at least 90 degrees and let it go dry on the skins. As alcohol levels increase during fermentation more tannin is extracted from the skins. His methods resulted in fully extracted, full-bodied, tannic wines with lots of alcohol. Listening to wine writers' cries for lighter, more food friendly wines Sobon

experimented with lower fermentation temperatures and pressing before the wine was dry, completing fermentation without the skins. "The result was more fruit, more color, less tannin but the same alcohol levels." The wines were still big but they were more balanced. It became apparent that excess tannin was neither the key to longevity nor the solution to balanced wines. "But," he explained, "Zinfandel is improved with higher extraction and higher alcohol."

Carol Shelton of Carol Shelton Wines has been making Zinfandel in Sonoma County since the early 1980s. She agreed with Sobon about cooler fermentation temperatures. After years of experimentation she now cold soaks her fruit prior to fermentation extracting flavor without extracting tannins, then ferments at 75 to 78 degrees. In order to prevent too much tannin she does fewer pump overs as the alcohol level builds. She also credits better equipment with better wines. "We can be so much more gentle in our handling of the grapes now," she explained. "Presses and pumps are so much softer and more gentle than they used to be."

Scott Harvey, now of Scott Harvey Wines of Napa cut his teeth on Amador County Zinfandel in the 1970s with Cary Gott at Montevina before starting Santino Winery in 1979. "We were making 16% alcohol wines, big, prune, plummy, port-like Zins. They sold really well." Harvey credits a lunch with Darrell Corti as setting him on the path of producing a lighter, more elegant style. "Besides, I started tasting the style of wines I was making and didn't like them."

In the early '80s he started picking at lower sugars, dropped the alcohol and produced lighter wines. "I liked the wines but it wasn't long before inventory started building up in the warehouse. The wines weren't selling." By the late

'80s he had switched back to a higher alcohol style and sales followed.

Harvey has ridden up and down that escalator a few times since then, trying to find the balance between alcohol, body and elegance. His litmus test for a good wine is, can you take it home and enjoy it with food? But he's not sure that's true for Zinfandel drinkers in general. Whenever he moderated too much towards elegance, with higher acids and lower alcohol, sales dipped. Now he's let them drift up again, targeting the 15% range of alcohol and a pH of 3.6. "Zin drinkers want that style," he said.

There is no question that advances in both grape growing and winemaking have allowed winemakers to put better wines in the bottle. But that hasn't changed the essential nature of Zinfandel. Zinfandel still produces fruit forward, rambunctious, expressive wines. Nor has the winemaking community narrowed in on one consistent style. Zin lovers still have their pick of styles, from fresh and fruity, to elegantly-styled, to robustly powerful to purple-teethed brawlers.

Carol Shelton summed it up well saying there is room for many different styles explaining "there is nothing wrong with a rich, jammy wine but it still needs to be balanced. Too much ripeness and low acid are as unbalanced as too much tannin." After all these years Zinfandel remains a work in progress with winemakers continuing to push limits and stretch boundaries in exciting ways. Zinfandel still retains the power to intrigue, impress and entertain us. What's next?

