



# ZINFANDEL

## A HISTORY OF A GRAPE AND ITS WINE

by Charles L. Sullivan

There have been earlier books on the subject of Zinfandel, and there will undoubtedly be others yet to come, for—as the Book of Ecclesiastes says—“of the making of books there is no end.” However it is safe to say that the previous books were mere precursors to Charles L. Sullivan’s *Zinfandel, a History of a Grape and its Wine*, and that forthcoming books on the subject will have to stand on the shoulders of this seminal work.

Sullivan is a historian who has taken California wine as his topic, and he clearly loves his subject. He has been researching it for over forty years. He has done the dry, scholarly work, plowing through local 19th and 20th Century newspapers from the *San Jose Mercury* to the *St. Helena Star* and trade journals like *California Farmer* and *California Grape Grower*. He has traveled to the East Coast to peruse dusty old agricultural journals. He has gone to Vienna to study the Central European origins of the illusive Zinfandel grape. In short, he has done all of the historical heavy lifting and done it so well that it should not need redoing in the foreseeable future.

But the best news about this book is its readability. Most wine books are more on the order of encyclopedias: books you pick up for their value as reference tools. This is one of those rare wine books that you can settle down with in a favorite rocker, a glass of good red at your side and read for the sheer pleasure of the reading itself. Sullivan’s prose is as clear and crisp as a well-crafted claret. (And he has the statistics to show that Zinfandel was a major com-

ponent in pre-prohibition era California clarets.)

The basic organization of the book is chronological, taking you through the history of the grape as it came from Europe, first to the east coast as a table grape and later to California where it was put to better uses. Interlarded among the historical chapters are charming digressions into such stories as that of the colorful Hungarian “Count” Haraszthy (who apparently met his end eaten by alligators in Nicaragua but who definitely was *not* the first person to bring the Zinfandel grape to America) and into such mysteries as the link between Zinfandel and the Italian Primitivo, and the Croatian origins of the grape.

Yet, for all the history and the wonderful stories, the book has an intimate tone. Sullivan’s first person narrative voice crops up throughout the book when he has something personal to say, as he often does. He lets you know, on the very first page, how he and his wife came to an appreciation of California wines, he is especially outspoken about writers who have misinterpreted his research into the Primitivo grape and the length of its

tenure in Italy. Sullivan—as befits a historian—is modest and careful in his own conclusions, as you can see from a couple of chapter heads: “How I Solved the Mysteries Surrounding Zinfandel—Sort of” and “The Mysteries of Origins Solved—Probably.” And he has some fine tales to tell about his own great wine finds.

The book concludes with an excellent summary of California grape growing regions and the role that Zinfandel has played in each of them. The only aspect of this book, which will become dated, is a very useful review of vintages, year by year, from 1990 to 2002. Is it too much to hope that Mr. Sullivan can be persuaded to keep his vintage reviews up to date with an occasional column in this august journal?

This book merits being called the definitive treatment of your favorite beverage and the grape it comes from—“probably”. If you don’t already own it, go to your favorite bookstore, and buy it today. If you already have it but have not yet read it, start it this evening. You will thank me for the suggestion.

**Roger Moss, ZAP Advocate Member**