



Zinfandel & Plavac Mali Not The Same

Zinfandel's origins still a mystery.

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Davis, California, November 10, 1998— The prime suspect in the hunt for the original Zinfandel has now been ruled out by UC Davis Viticulture & Enology Department Professor Carole Meredith, as a result of collecting more than 150 grapevine samples from vineyards in Croatia in May, 1998 and bringing them back to Davis for DNA analysis. Plavac Mali, the most important red wine grape in Croatia, is not Zinfandel. A grape grown in southern Italy, Primitivo di Gioia [pronounced 'joy-a'], is the same variety as Zinfandel. However, it is unlikely that Zinfandel came from Italy because Zinfandel was being grown in California years before Primitivo is known to have been in Italy. Thus the question still remains: where did Zinfandel originate?

"Plavac Mali has been a major suspect in the Zinfandel puzzle for decades. Many people have proposed that it is the original Zinfandel. It certainly looks a lot like Zinfandel. We have now shown pretty conclusively that this is not the case," Meredith announced in a speech at the Napa Valley Viticultural Fair on Nov. 10.

The Search & Research

In 1967 UC Davis plant pathologist Austin Goheen enjoyed a glass of the local red wine while visiting Italian plant pathologist Giovanni Martelli in Bari, Italy. Dr. Goheen observed that the wine tasted like Zinfandel and that the vines looked like Zinfandel; the variety was Primitivo di Gioia. Cuttings were brought to Davis and planted next to Zinfandel. Tests available at the time suggested that they were probably the same variety but the conclusive result had to wait until the early 1990s when DNA tests performed in Professor Meredith's research laboratory showed that they were indeed the same.

These DNA comparisons were extended to six samples of Plavac Mali, all that were available at the time. Meredith's research group found that the six Plavac Mali samples were not the same as Zinfandel but were also not the same as each other—there were three different types of Plavac Mali in only these six samples. That surprising result caused her to wonder how many Plavac Mali types there might be in all. Could one of them be the original Zinfandel?

In May 1998, with the help of Miljenko Grgich, the Croatian co-owner of Grgich Hills Cellars in the Napa Valley, she traveled to Croatia and collected 150 leaf samples of Plavac Mali from vineyards throughout the main growing region for Plavac Mali, the Dalmatian Coast of Croatia, which is directly across the Adriatic Sea from Italy. Meredith was assisted in this effort by Dr. Ivan Pejic and Edi Maletic from the Viticulture Department of the University of Zagreb and by Jasenka Piljac, a UC Davis graduate who returned home to Croatia.

Back in Meredith's UC Davis lab, these samples were subjected to DNA analysis and the results showed that almost all of

them were identical to each other and that not one of them was Zinfandel. However, Plavac Mali does seem to be a close relative of Zinfandel. "For this reason, we still think that Zinfandel probably originated in Croatia," explains Meredith, "but if it still exists there it must be tucked away in a remote location, perhaps one of the many islands. It is certainly not the major variety Plavac Mali."

"When the Zinfandel Heritage Vineyard—the joint UC Davis-Zinfandel Advocates & Producers vineyard in Oakville—was established with cuttings from the best old Zinfandel vineyards in California," Meredith explains, "we wondered if any of these vines might actually be Plavac Mali, since it is known that a number of Croatian immigrants came to California in the late 1800s and that some of them brought grapevine cuttings with them. Maybe some of those cuttings were Plavac Mali. We thought it was possible that perhaps some of our finest old Zinfandel vineyards are actually Plavac Mali. So we analyzed the DNA from vines from each of the 57 accessions and were pleased to find out that every single one is a true Zinfandel. None of them is a Plavac Mali," she adds.

Which Means...?

What we call Zinfandel could still be a Croatian grape variety but to find it would require a much more extensive search through Croatian vineyards. Another explanation might be that Zinfandel could be a seedling of Plavac Mali that sprung up in a vineyard somewhere and became a variety in its own right.

Why is this research important? "What is the origin of the Zinfandel grape, which is so closely linked to America's pioneer heritage?" asks Rebecca Robinson, Executive Director of Zinfandel Advocates & Producers, a group of consumers and Zinfandel growers and winemakers who support the Heritage Vineyard. "There's a lot of emotion attached to this, since everyone wants to find out where our ancestors came from. Today Zinfandel remains a mystery, since we don't know how or when Zin got to America, but only that it's been here a very long time," she adds.

Zin as Americana

"With Cabernet and Chardonnay you have a lot of Frenchified history attached as these grapes were transplanted to the new world," muses Alison Crowe of the Communications Office in the UC Davis Viticulture & Enology Department. "Zin doesn't have any of that baggage; it's exciting because Zinfandel is ours and not connected to a great and ponderous tradition—whether that's how the grapes are grown or the wine is made or how the wine is enjoyed," she adds.

Professor Meredith presented these findings at the Napa Valley Viticultural Fair on November 10, 1998 at Napa Expo Fairgrounds.