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Napa Valley Zinfandel: The Chronicle recommends

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Growing Zinfandel in the heart of Cabernet country is a bold statement.

As we headed into this panel we wondered what spot in the world Napa Zin occupies. Most are a bit spendy to compete with everyday Zins, and if a spot like Dry Creek Valley has its Zin cred established, Napa has largely banked on other grapes - though specimens of old-vine Zinfandel in spots like Chiles Valley can be extraordinary to behold.

Can Zin maintain its populist roots while dabbling in Napa ZIP codes? Possibly.

If the price tags are high, we encountered vintners that approach Zinfandel with every bit as much rigor as great Cabernet.

Perhaps that's how Zin can bridge those two realms.

2009 Brown Estate Napa Valley Zinfandel ($36): The Brown family has been making wine off their Chiles Valley property for 15 years. They've nailed it again with this stylish effort blended from their four estate parcels. Cocoa and tree bark accents to the aromas frame terrific balsam and huckleberry, with juicy, deep fruit. A beautiful, elegant Zin.

2009 Fontanella Family Napa Valley Zinfandel ($36): Jeff Fontanella mixed fruit from Mount Veeder, where his eponymous winery is located, with grapes from Oakville. The presence of 55 percent new American oak is slightly evident, but lavish blackberry and cassis flavors edged with vanilla and sandalwood are given backbone by chewy tannins.

2008 Neal Family Vineyards Rutherford Zinfandel ($24): The Neals got their start in vineyard management, but their Howell Mountain label is turning out impressive wines. Sourced from their organic Rutherford parcel, this shows off dusty tannins that could equally evoke Dry Creek, and a pure, fruit-driven style. Subtle and smoky, with burnt sage, cacao nib, musk and dusky black cherry.

2008 Frog's Leap Napa Valley Zinfandel ($27): John Williams' label remains loyal to a perfumed, restrained style of Zin enhanced with a bit of Petite Sirah and Carignane. Leans more to raspberry and robust cherry than darker fruit, with pretty accents of charcoal and dried sage, and chewy, solid tannins. Great for the table.

2008 Raymond Small Lot Napa Valley Zinfandel ($35): Raymond, now owned by the Boisset family, turns to Chiles Valley for this tight-knit effort. A subtle violet-edged nose is bolstered by Bing cherry and mineral-edged tannins. On the serious side for Zin, with nearly 20 months in barrel and a smoky edge to the fruit. Give it a year to mellow.

2008 Tres Sabores Rutherford Zinfandel ($35): This forthcoming effort from Julie Johnson harnessed a slightly larger crop (about 2.5 tons/acre) from her Rutherford vineyard, which helped land the alcohol under 14 percent. It's clean-lined Zin with a lighter touch - a fruity raft of boysenberry and bright cherry, with candied-violet aromas, a hint of musk and a savory mineral edge.

Panelists: Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor; Gordana Josovic, sommelier, Epic Roasthouse; Hector Osuna, wine director, Eos Restaurant and Wine Bar.

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