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Revisiting Zinfandel, with a side of wine writing 12 comments

Posted by **steve** on Feb 17, 2012 in **Zinfandel** | **12 comments**

I liked **Wilfred Wong's** article ("*Discovering Zinfandel's true self*") in the Jan-Feb issue of **Vineyard & Winery Management**. Unfortunately, it's not available for free online. One of the reasons wine writers like Wilfred get better and more interesting to read as they get older is because they have more experience.

Experience, like love, is one thing money can't buy. Wilfred takes us down Memory Lane in describing the trials and tribulations of California's only native varietal wine (well, it was born someplace in southern or southeastern Europe but it's always referred to as Californian), from the balanced, dry style pioneered by Kenwood in the early 1970s through the White Zinfandel craze, the high alcohol thing (still happening) and the emergence of serious producers, like Ridge and Storybook Mountain. In my opinion, understanding this evolving history contributes toward a greater appreciation of the wine you drink.

I happened to be reading that article the same day I went through the latest batch of **De Loach** Zinfandels, six in all, along with a number of other North Coast Zinfandels to round out my flight. Those De Loaches were so good, I did something I rarely do: I emailed **Jean-Charles Boisset** to offer my salutations. I do this 4 or 5 times a year. There's no formula; it's instinctive on my part, the way most things I do are—just a feeling that I want to do it, and so I do. Winemakers are always keen to know what critics think of their wines, and usually they have to wait until the review comes out. But sometimes I just want to personally let the producer know what a good job I think he or she did. We all like that, don't we—I mean, to be appreciated.

I tend to classify today's Zinfandels into two broad classes: high-alcohol, overripe bruisers and a more elegant, "claret"-style. But even these two broad distinctions must be sub-

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divided. The first, the high-alcohol style, has a “good” expression and a “not so good” one. High alcohol, in and of itself, isn’t necessarily bad, particularly in a Zinfandel and particularly from, say, Dry Creek Valley or El Dorado County, where a prickly mouthfeel is part of Zin’s typicity. You may not like the heat from alcohol, but if you’re fair (and critics should be), you have to recognize that it’s an intrinsic sign of the terroir, same as acidity in German Riesling or tannins in Nebbiolo. A good example of a high alcohol Zinfandel is Rockpile’s 2010 Rockpile Ridge Vineyard. It’s official alcohol is 15.6% (the number on the label is so tiny and pale, I practically needed a microscope to find it). That surely is high alcohol, and for all I know (given the long leash the TTB gives wineries), the actual alcohol could be well over 16%. But you expect that in a Zinfandel from Rockpile, the appellation; to complain about it is like saying Alaska shouldn’t be cold in February.

So I gave the Rockpile a respectable score, even though it’s not really a style I like or wish to drink. More to my liking were those De Loaches, especially the ‘09 Nova Vineyard, whose official ABV is 15%. Fifteen percent seems like the sweet spot for Zinfandel. My two highest-rated Zins of last year, Seghesio’s ‘09 Cortina (Dry Creek Valley) and Ravenswood’s 2008 Old Hill (Sonoma Valley), also weighed in at 15%. Make Zin much less ripe than that, and its flavors turn green and stingy. Zin is a notoriously uneven ripener anyway, and it takes heat, sun and good viticulture to get the job done right.

But if Zin gets much higher than 15% or so, it loses everything about it we like. Wilfred, in his article, quoted someone as saying, “...*high-alcohol zins become more alike, less distinguishable, less expressive of the vineyard.*” I couldn’t agree more. Almost all of my top Zinfandels over the years have been vineyard designates, with ABV right at or just above or below 15%. All of them—the ones I mentioned above, as well as Sbragia ‘09 Gino’s, V. Sattui ‘08 Black-Sears, Ravenswood ‘08 Dickerson, John Tyler 2007 Bacigalupi, Williams Selyem ‘09 Papera, Vermeil ‘09 Luvisi—are in that neighborhood.

Rules are meant to be broken, though, and there always are outliers that succeed. St. Francis somehow made the 16.1% alcohol on their ‘09 Pagani reasonable, primarily due to the fantastically rich layers of fruit and spice. At the other extreme is the 13.9% alcohol of Ottomino’s 2007 Von Weidlich Vineyard, which is in the Green Valley. In my review, I found “tobacco [and] cola” flavors and high acidity. Both of those sensory qualities testify to grapes that were not anywhere near as ripe as they would have been had they come from Dry Creek Valley, just a few miles across the river as the crow flies. But the wine itself was fine, as elegant as Zin gets. I suspect it came from a sunnier, higher elevation part of Green Valley than where Pinot Noir grows. Ottomino’s website says “*the Von Weidlich Vineyard...averages nearly 10 degrees warmer than adjacent areas.*”

Zinfandel is an enormously challenging grape and wine to get right, harder, I think, than Cabernet Sauvignon. It’s not quite as noble as Cabernet, and cannot be (that’s a whole other discussion). But if I never again had the opportunity to drink Cabernet [unthinkable], a fine North Coast Zinfandel would be a worthy substitute for a full-bodied red wine.

I’ll close by reverting to what I said earlier about experience. You don’t need an intimate knowledge of wine history to enjoy a nice wine, obviously. But for the professional wine writer, experience is “a treasure laid up in Heaven.” I can hardly imagine writing about anything without all this memory in my head I’ve accumulated over the years. It both informs my writing and passes it through to the reader, in the mysterious, alchemical osmosis that connects writer and reader in a bond of incredible intimacy. That’s why reading Wilfred Wong is so educational, and also why the wine world is poorer with the passing of such as Robert L. Balzer and Steve Pitcher.

12 Responses to “Revisiting Zinfandel, with a side of wine writing”

Dennis Tsiorbas says:

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- ✦ Interviews/Q&As
- ✦



February 17, 2012 at 3:53 am

Steve, thanks for this great piece on Zins, it sort of ties a small bow on a big package of the little I know of it; this was a longer article than usual, but you didn't mention Russian River Zin [That has some history], but when you said: "But if I never again had the opportunity to drink Cabernet [unthinkable], a fine North Coast Zinfandel would be a worthy substitute for a full-bodied red wine." I thought RR.

As for writing and history, everyone who does it starts somewhere.



Steve McIntosh says:

February 17, 2012 at 6:14 am

DeLoach has come a long way under JCB. I'm curious how you scored those Zins.



Cato says:

February 17, 2012 at 10:26 am

Your description of Zin reminds me why I prefer Petite Sirah....although I do like some of the Ridge Zina.....the rest (SNOOZE)



Patrick says:

February 17, 2012 at 11:30 am

Probably nothing that I as a mere consumer could say will change things, but I have to say that I'm not totally down with the idea of wine critics sending spontaneous notes of congratulation to winemakers. Seems gratuitous; they'll see the review (online if they want it sooner than print).



Ryan Flinn says:

February 17, 2012 at 11:35 am

After tasting through numerous wineries at ZAP's 2011 fest, I felt like there was

Livermore Valley

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- ✦ Memoir
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- ✦ Sauv Blanc
- ✦ Shipping
- ✦ Social Media
- ✦ Sonoma County
- ✦ Sparkling wine
- ✦ Spotlight
- ✦ Steve Noir

a turn to more restraint and balance among the producers. This year, it seemed like many struggled with the recent harvests, which have been as you know difficult and colder.



steve says:

February 17, 2012 at 12:13 pm

Patrick, well sometimes I get lonely tasting by myself and want to reach out!



kevin says:

February 17, 2012 at 2:11 pm

I think patrick wants you to reach out and touch yourself. I disagree with him though, You have proven yourself to be un biased and “attaboys” always feel good.



steve says:

February 17, 2012 at 6:54 pm

Hey Kevin, thanks.



Monte says:

February 17, 2012 at 9:13 pm

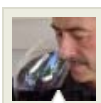
As an educator, there is a saying that applies here. I had a principal that asked us to “catch a kid doing something right and tell them.” It was amazing how many kids had never had a teacher actually tell them they did something well – most had only seen the good grade on the assignment. Many students were shocked that someone said something positive. It helped transform the school culture in the best way. Maybe our politicians should try this with each other.

I say when someone really knocks it out, let them know. While I know they will be thrilled with a great review, the fact that you took the time to personally contact the winemaker will always mean a lot to them. You have always been open about your methods and this is just another example.

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Anatoli Levine says:
February 18, 2012 at 8:55 pm

Very interesting read. Typically I try avoiding the wines at above 15% ABV, or at least a severely restrict my expectations. A week ago I tried 2000 Carlisle Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel, and I was completely blown away – it was literally the best wine I ever tasted – perfect amount of fruit and spices, very balanced – a wine with finesse, the word I typically use (thanks to Matt Kramer) only for Pinot Noir. Then I looked at the label – 16.4% ABV – it was seriously hard to believe, but this is what the label said. Apparently, the quality of producer rules – everything else falls in place in a good hands...



steve says:
February 19, 2012 at 9:11 am

Anatoli, that's why I've said for years, you can't judge a wine simply by the alcohol level. You have to taste it and see if it's good.



Clay says:
February 20, 2012 at 1:35 pm

Steve,

Thank you for mentioning the Rockpile Ridge Zinfandel. Let me know if you would ever like to visit the Rockpile AVA.

Cheers,

Clay

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- ✦ February 2011
- ✦ January 2011
- ✦ December 2010
- ✦ November 2010
- ✦ October 2010
- ✦ September 2010
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