

LAURIE DANIEL

THE GRAPEVINE



For grilled food, think zinfandel

Some people cook outdoors year-round, rain or shine. Others wait till the end of May — Memorial Day weekend, often referred to as the unofficial start of summer — to dust off their grills.

Grilling season gets me thinking about robust reds that pair well with a smoky hunk of meat, or even grilled chicken or vegetables. It's really not difficult to come up with an appropriate bottle — just about any good medium- to full-bodied red will do. But when we fire up the grill, I often open the zinfandel.

That hasn't always been the case in recent years. A lot of zinfandel became so exaggerated that I found the wines exhausting to drink. They were heavy, pruney, sometimes noticeably sweet and too high in alcohol, with some wines approaching 17 percent. Those high-octane wines still are out there, but

I've been tasting a lot more zins that are lively and well-balanced. I gravitate toward zins that have plenty of brambly berry fruit, as well as some peppery, spicy notes and perhaps a hint of tobacco.

While a lot of the bruisers can be pretty expensive, those made in a more restrained style often are reasonably priced — a bonus if you're planning a big gathering.

Zin specialist Ravenswood makes some very good, but pricey, single-vineyard wines, but the winery also produces the inexpensive, widely available **2010 "Vintners Blend" Old Vine Zinfandel (\$10)**, which is a medium-weight, easy-to-drink wine. The **2010 Buena Vista Sonoma Zinfandel (\$15)** is another good buy, with ripe berry, a hint of tobacco and medium weight and tannins, as is the bright and spicy **2011 Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Zinfandel (\$17)**, made from Mendocino County grapes.

Rancho Zabaco and Dry Creek Vineyard, both in Sonoma County, produce several good zins, including nicely priced county blends. The **2011 Rancho Zabaco Sonoma Heritage Vines Zinfandel (\$18)** and the **2010 Dry Creek Heritage Zinfandel (\$19)** are both bright and spicy, with medium tannins.

Ridge Vineyards is known for its zinfandels from Sonoma County and elsewhere, including Paso

Robles. Its **2011 East Bench Zinfandel (\$28)** from Dry Creek Valley is ripe, plump and lively, with fine tannins.

Ridge also excels with zin-based blends. The **2011 Ridge Geyserville (\$38)**, which is about three-quarters zinfandel, is elegant, spicy and brambly, while the less expensive **2011 Ridge Three Valleys (\$26)** is a little more exuberantly fruity.

Although zinfandel is thought to have originated in Croatia, the group Zinfandel Advocates and Producers, or ZAP, refers to it as "America's Heritage wine." That's because the grape has achieved probably its finest expression here. Historians have documented its existence in the United States as far back as the 1820s, but its popularity really soared during California's Gold Rush, when sturdy wines made from zinfandel grapes sustained countless miners.

Laurie Daniel's column is special to The Tribune.

PICK OF THE WEEK

Eos Estate 2009 Zinfandel (\$18) For a local choice to accompany your holiday grilling, consider this medium-weight zin. It offers lively berry fruit, notes of tobacco and spice and a somewhat drying finish.

