

# JON BONNÉ *Thirst* Sonoma Zin shows its stripes

Some day, we will recall this as the moment when Zinfandel made its great shift back to the future.

Just a couple of years ago, it was hard to see a path forward for California's beloved grape — a way to transcend what its recent past had wrought: too many overly ripe, wobbly versions wearing too much make-up and trying too hard to make an impression.

Much Zin was intended to be a glassful of snob repellent. It accomplished that, and as collateral damage chased off many of those who had cherished it in its quieter, more classic forms.

Something has changed. And where the state of Zin is

**Bonné continues on M6** concerned, to steal a line from Bill Murray in "Groundhog Day": Anything different is good.

Is it that the path to populism reached its eventual bottom? Or did the defenders of Zin's higher virtues finally have their voices heard, with the grape wiping off its gunk of eyeliner and embracing a more serious path?

The shift could even be witnessed in this year's Zinfandel Advocates and Producers event, which shifted from full-bore party mode to something a bit more structured and high-end. (Not, perhaps, to everyone's glee. Populism has plenty of fans.)

Not too serious, mind you. The top Zinfandels

still find a way to finesse their best qualities, namely that beautiful mix of savory nuance and proudly Californian fruit. But there is a wonderful diversity of Zins being made right now that also honor their origins — including from some of the state's most historic vineyards, which frankly are owed the respect.

Our latest lineup of Zinfandels from Sonoma only underscored this point. With two very different vintages to consider, 2011 and 2012, I wasn't entirely sure how we would fare. But the results were, on balance, a pleasure.

As for those vintages: 2011 was the year of the great chill, with ripeness often elusive. At its best, it yielded Zins with nuance and freshness, almost a mandate against the jammy wobble of years past.

But it was a complicated year. Even classic benchmarks like Ridge's two Zinfandel-based wines, Geyserville and Lytton Springs, seemed somewhat discombobulated. Lytton Springs, usually the Oscar of this odd couple, took on a Felix-like rectitude.

By contrast, 2012 was generous and happy. We'll be seeing those wines arriving for some time yet, but many of the early results are a joy.

A wine like Bedrock's Old Vine bottle shows not only Morgan Twain-Peterson's utter love of Sonoma terroir (no different than his father, Ravenswood's Joel Peterson) but also that perfect combination of the grape's dual nature.

The wine is joyous and studious at the same time, a celebration of Zinfandel's majesty.

As for locales, I do wonder if there's a bit of a shift in the power base. Dry Creek Valley has typically been Sonoma's Zin stronghold. But there were notable peaks and valleys in our Dry Creek lineup — although some wonderful peaks. At the same time, there was much beauty to be found in the Russian River Valley; not a huge surprise, seeing as Zin lovers, from the 1800s pioneers through Williams-Selyem's Burt Williams and on to Carlisle's Mike Officer, have always advocated for that grape as a Russian River specialty.

And Sonoma Valley, whose efforts often are overlooked as Zin's ground zero migrated north and west, is once again showing all of its historic potential. The trick there may be matching great wine-making (and in a few cases, better farming) to the area's wonderful vineyards. But as a sweet spot for Zin, it is worth revisiting.

In other words, if you've been a Zin loyalist, there is plenty of pleasure to be found. And if you've been shying away — if strong applications of snob repellent exiled you to

Pinotland — this is a time to explore once again.

For Sonoma, as it is with many corners of California, these are happy times for Zinfandel.



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**2012 Bedrock Old Vine Sonoma Valley Zinfandel** (\$24, 14.6% alcohol): Not to diminish the red-spiced depth of his Bedrock Monte Rosso (\$42, 15%), but Morgan Twain-Peterson has pulled off a remarkable feat with his basic bottle — a perfect balance of plummy fruit, spice (carob, allspice, fennel) and perfume, and a perfect extraction of tannin. The provenance helps a bit: almost 40 percent from his Bedrock site, plus some other Sonoma bright lights, including Monte Rosso and Casa Santinamaria.

**2011 Suacci Carciere Bismark Vineyard Sonoma County Zinfandel** (\$30, 15.4%): With help from winemaker Ryan Zepaltas, the Suacci and Carciere families have again shown a splendid side of Sonoma, here from an igneous-soil mountain site that starts at 1,400 feet elevation. Pinot dominates this label, and there's a stylistic kinship — nuanced earth and mace spice, and plummy, multi-hued fruit. Layered and complex.

**2012 Broc Cellars Vine Starr Sonoma County Zinfandel** (\$27, 12.7%): Chris Brockway's work with this bottle, from two Sonoma vineyards, remains a redefining proposition for Zinfandel. It has the raspberry fruit of old classic Zinfandel — in an aromatic, herb-tinged way, not a jammy way. Tangy and bright, like fresh berries on a warm

day.



Craig Lee / Special to The Chronicle

**2011 Horse & Plow Grist Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel** (\$32, 14.5%): Chris Condos and Suzanne Hagins tapped the mature Grist planting, dating to 1974 and organically farmed atop Bradford Mountain, 1,000 feet above the valley. Those dusty Dry Creek tannins are matched by wild strawberry, ginger and coriander. Ripe and refined.

**2011 Amphora Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel** (\$26, 14.6%): Once again, winemaker Rick Hutchinson has found a pretty expression in this blended Dry Creek effort. It nods to both the old school and the post-modern: A heady floral side adds depth to cinnamon spice, subtle raspberry and cracked pepper.

**2012 Hobo Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel** (\$23, 14.3%): Kenny Likitprakong's latest from Dry Creek spans the appellation, from its southern edge to the heights of Rockpile. Juicy, and marked by boysenberry, blackberry and that perfect dust-and-violets aspect. A grown-up's Zin. One of its vineyard sources is also used for Hobo's equally good 2012 Branham Vineyard Rockpile Zinfandel (\$30, 14.1%), which shows Likitprakong's talent with finessing tannin.

**2011 Amapola Creek Vinas Antiguas Monte Rosso Vineyard Sonoma Valley Zinfandel** (\$42, 15.5%): It's great to see famed winemaker Richard Arrowood still working with great fruit from Sonoma Valley — or in this case high above, with the ancient mountaintop vines at Monte Rosso, which is now controlled by the Gallo family. The style is on the hefty side, but even so the juiciness and refinement is undeniable: toast and tangy cranberry fruit, like the best part of stuffing, with a subtle cedar side to bring a savory counterpoint.

**2011 Ridge Lytton Springs Dry Creek Valley Red** (\$38, 14.4%): Cold 2011 brought a bit of

identity switch to Ridge's two Sonoma wines. Fans of Geyserville's eloquence were likely to find it in the often riper Lytton Springs, which has grown more refined in the past few months. Lytton's darker fruit flavors are on hand, matched to wild blueberry, burnt sage and a fragrant sandalwood aspect. A dose of Petite Sirah brings tannins that now taste integrated. A curious, but fun, vintage for this site.

**2012 Barber Cellars Mr. Beast Topolos Vineyard Sonoma Mountain Zinfandel** (\$25, 13.8%): Mike Barber's tribute to a classic Zin style hails from a biodynamically farmed field blend on Sonoma Mountain that includes Alicante Bouschet and Petite Sirah. It's on point in both style and name — there's a rowdy side to the tannins, so give it time. The cardamom and nutmeg spice will be winning as the fruit begins to shine in coming months.

**2011 Carol Shelton Wines Karma Zin Bastoni Vineyard Sonoma County Zinfandel** (\$33, 14.8%): Shelton's specialty is Zin, and this effort from an eastern Sonoma spot north of Santa Rosa is savory and a touch rustic: lots of tannin (Alicante Bouschet and Petite Sirah in the mix) and a toasted almond note to match its jammy, robust fruit.

**2011 Acorn Alegria Vineyard Heritage Vines Russian River Valley Zinfandel** (\$42, 14.5%): Betsy & Bill Nachbaur's historic vineyard outside Healdsburg dates as far back as 1890, and this includes not just the usual field-blend

material but also bits of Trousseau, Plavac Mali and more. Their interpretation features a bit of obvious oak toast, but the dustiness and nuance — cassia, blueberry, brambly currants — give it great distinction.

**2012 Rancho Zabaco Heritage Vines Sonoma County Zinfandel**

(\$15, 15.3%): Score one for Gallo knowing what many Zin lovers want. This latest Zabaco is jammy, sure, but also chewy and bright, with birch-bark spice, cherry skin and a sweet blackberry finish.

**2011 Buena Vista Sonoma County Zinfandel**

(\$15, 13.5%): From this Boisset-owned property, the diametric opposite of Rancho Zabaco. Light, pleasant and displaying straightforward fresh raspberry flavors.

*Panelists: Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor; Josh Haberman, wine director, Harris' Restaurant; Tonya Pitts, manager and sommelier, One Market.*