

California Zinfandel: The names to know

It's a variety synonymous with Californian wine, but for years it was overlooked in favour of fashionable Bordeaux styles. Now, thanks to some of the state's best winemakers, it's the star of field blends and single-varietal bottlings alike. Jeff Cox shares his top producer picks.



Anyone who likes 'the blood and sun of California', as a European friend characterised his first taste of Zinfandel, should give recognition to the early Italian pioneers who settled the coasts of central and northern California.

The regions looked like northern Italy. They had Italy's Mediterranean climate. And those Italian farmers brought with them more than 2,000 years of grape-growing and winemaking experience.

They didn't have degrees in viticulture or oenology. They farmed by the seat of their pants. But they were savvy as hell.

Decanter

The pioneers are long gone, though you can still taste that savvy in wines from their vineyards, many planted between 100-140 years ago. These vineyards are mostly Zinfandel, a variety that came to California just a few years before the Italian settlers, and which the Italians favoured almost immediately upon their arrival.

They planted a few other varieties along with the Zin: Carignan, Petite Sirah, Alicante Bouschet, Grenache, Mataro (their name for Mourvèdre) and even a few vines of white Chasselas, among others, to give diversity. These field blends were yielding wine grapes when Monet and Van Gogh were painting their masterpieces.

The head-trained vines in those vineyards are ancient, thick and gnarled now. They don't yield much fruit, but they clutch the earth in a strong embrace and impart its essence, and the richness of their age, to their grapes.

Dismissed for years as not worth much – even torn out to be replaced by the new darlings of Bordeaux varieties, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir – the true nobility of these ancient vines is now being recognised. Historic Vineyard Society is a non-profit organisation devoted to their preservation.

Newer plantings of Zinfandel can certainly produce delicious, worthy wines. The variety goes easy on the tannins, but finds backbone in its acid profile and spiciness on the palate.

One of its glories is its ability to age, as was proven at a recent gathering of friends when a double magnum of 1987 Joseph Swan Vineyards' old-vine Zinfandel had the crowd cheering. 'I can smell that wine in here,' yelled a cook from the kitchen.

It was an obscure and ancient Croatian variety called Crljenak Kaštelanski that emigrated to America in the early 19th century and became California's signature variety, Zinfandel. Unlike the first waves of human immigrants to the United States, who have now all passed on, some of those first-generation vines are still with us, providing glorious drinking.

Sonoma County: DeLoach Vineyards

While the winery is in the Russian River Valley AVA, the fruit used to make DeLoach's Forgotten Vines bottling comes from vineyards in several Sonoma County appellations. Russian River Valley supplies 75% of the grapes in the blend, 10% is from the Monte Rosso vineyard in Sonoma Valley, 10% from Fountaingrove in Santa Rosa, and 5% from Knight's Valley in far eastern Sonoma County.

Winemaker Brian Maloney, who came up with the name for the bottling, says the vines that contribute to Forgotten Vines have an average age of more than 100 years old. Jean-Charles Boisset, the owner of DeLoach and husband of Gina Gallo (see p70), says these old vines impart a notion of history. 'There's spirituality in the wine, and a deep terroir that gives you a sense of the time these vines have been alive.' The components of Forgotten Vines are also sold as single-vineyard old-vine field blends by DeLoach. These vineyards include Fanucchi, Riebli, Rue and Saitone in Russian River Valley.

Maloney wants to emphasise the fresh fruit character in these grapes, so he lightly crushes them and gives them a four- to seven-day cold soak. He then ferments and presses them when the wine is dry. He uses native yeasts and finishes any laggard fermenters with commercial yeast if needed.



DeLoach, Forgotten Vines, Sonoma County, California, 2016

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The aroma of this elegant organic wine, part of the Boisset Collection, features fresh red raspberries, tobacco leaf and chocolate. On the palate, its red fruits are bright and acidic, giving it a succulent appeal,...

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