

It's Zinfandel

By Gabe Sasso • Snooth.com • July 13, 2018

The history of Zinfandel in America can be traced back to Italian Immigrants who planted it all over California for a number of reasons including its hearty nature. For that reason it was also the dominant choice of home winemakers in other parts of the country who were purchasing grapes shipped east from California. For years it was thought that Zinfandel was a genetic descendant of Italy's Primitivo. However genetic testing discovered that both Zinfandel and Primitivo are genetic matches for the Croatian grape Crljenak Kaštelanski.

Over time Zinfandel fell out of favor in comparison to some other varieties and a number of great old vineyards were pulled out. Some were actually saved because they were being used for the production of White Zinfandel. Many of those parcels are now the source of some great Single Vineyard Zinfandels. Old Vines matter for Zinfandel as much as any other grape, and more than most. **There are many Zinfandel Vineyards in California over 50 and 100 years old, some dating to the 1800's.** When they produce less fruit and struggle somewhat to give what they do, the results are often naturally more intense and layered with character a younger vine simply isn't capable of.

A sense of place is as important for Zinfandel as any grape. Single vineyard Pinot Noirs get a lot more press attention but the truth is that site to site variance for Zinfandel is even more dynamic. Zinfandel thrives in nearly all of California's regions, and brings different characteristics to the forefront depending on place. **While Zinfandel flourishes all over California, there are a few areas few that really raise the flag on what has become the Heritage grape of the Golden State.**

Dry Creek Valley – Located in Northern Sonoma County Dry Creek Valley is home to some of the best Zinfandels in the world. A number of multi-generational family producers in Dry Creek Valley are focused on Zinfandel which is their signature red grape. The classic Dry Creek Valley Zinfandels have structure, spice, and proportionate fruit in common. Some of the most famous and well regarded single vineyard parcels of Old Vine Zinfandel call Dry Creek Valley home.

Lodi – This Central California region is home to a number of heritage old vine Zinfandel vineyards. A group of winemakers there founded "The Native Project." Each winemaker commits to producing a Zinfandel each year from a true Old Vines Vineyard. Winemaking protocols are the same across the board and all that changes is the fruit source. This project really highlights how important site is to Zinfandel. Lodi Zinfandels tend to have an abundance of fruit. Tended properly they can also be well structured.

Napa Valley – Due to the popularity of Cabernet Sauvignon and the prices it can fetch there's not nearly as much Zinfandel in California's most famous wine growing region as there once was. However the old vines that do exist can produce excellent wines. Great Napa Valley Zinfandels are loaded with red fruit, proportionate and structured, often with more tannins than Zinfandel from many other regions.

Paso Robles – Initially known for big, fruity Zinfandel, there are now more producers focused on wines of structure and nuance that still have those fruity flavors Paso is famous for. Diverse climatic conditions in various parts of Paso Robles also assure lots of variance within the region for factors outside of site alone.

Russian River Valley – While it's best known for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay these days, cool, foggy Russian River Valley is the source of distinct Zinfandels too. The Zinfandels from here tend to feature lots of spice and fruit that is a bit more reticent in nature. Great Russian River Valley Zinfandels tend to age very well due in no small part to the wonderful acid they feature.

Well-made Zinfandel is fruity, balanced and a versatile food wine. Whether you're having a classic Italian Sunday Dinner, Smoked Brisket, Pizza, Traditional Mexican cuisine or so much more the terrific fruit, acid and structure of great Zinfandel is a great pairing choice. And of course there is no better pairing with the most of American of meals, The Burger, than Zinfandel.





California Dreaming

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Sometimes, the damp chill of winter stirs a not-so-subtle hankering for sunlight. You know the drill: long, dark, dreary days that make you want to hop on a plane and fly somewhere, anywhere hot and bright – preferably every weekend. Few have that luxury, but feeding the need for sunshine may be easier than you think.

Californian wine is notoriously bottled sunshine, so with each sip, some small part of you slips away to the Golden State. To send you on your way, here are terrific styles that part of the world does particularly well.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Does it get much better than a great Napa Cab, with its succulence and rich velvety goodness? Ever since 1976, when the British wine merchant Steven Spurrier hosted the famous “**Judgment of Paris**” blind tasting, Napa has been squarely on the fine wine map. That famous tasting pitted top Californian Cabernet Sauvignon wines against leading Cabernet-based wines from Bordeaux, France, and the results placed the regions pretty much neck-and-neck.

Not terribly surprising really. The climate ripens the grapes beautifully and consistently. The soil is well-suited to that grape variety. And the know-how is certainly there. Iconic names such as Cakebread Cellars, Clos du Val, Ridge Vineyards, Caymus, Opus One, Stag’s Leap and others regularly command top dollar for their saturated flavour, deep complexity and lush texture. There is no better way to taste the Californian sunshine than with a great glass of Cab.

CHARDONNAY

As well as ranking reds, the 1976 Judgment of Paris compared whites. Californian Chardonnays competed against those from the top Burgundy appellations such as Meursault and Puligny-Montrachet. The results shook the fine wine world. Amazingly, a 1973 Californian Chardonnay called Chateau Montelena came in first place. In fact, three of the top four wines were Californian Chardonnays.

It’s now an open secret California makes sterling Chardonnay with all the piercing precision, undulating layers of flavour and resonant length Burgundy can offer. Signorello, Paul Hobbs, Cakebread, Rombauer, Edna Valley Vineyard and Wente are certainly some names to trust.

Without a doubt, a great glass of Cali Chardonnay can brighten up any meal or moment – especially in the dead of a BC winter.

ZINFANDEL

The flagship red grape of California has got to be Zinfandel. And those who like it like it a lot. It’s a black grape variety that produces deeply rich reds tasting of blackberry, blueberry and raspberry cordials with hints of peppercorn. **Fruit-forward and opulent**, this delicious red is very easy to enjoy and offers terrific value much of the time. Names to look for include Caymus, Joel Gott, Ravenswood and Dancing Bull.

White Zinfandel, which is also made from the black Zinfandel grape, is of course pink, often sweeter, and can be quite delicious to quaff ice-cold on those days you want to channel a sunshine-on-your-shoulders moment. Its juicy flavours tend to suggest chin-drip peach and wild strawberries. Beringer makes a very good version.

RED BLEND

Sure, single varieties from California are terrific. But blends can knock it out of the park too, because each grape variety brings something to the mix. The winemaker can fiddle with the components, and the results are frequently better than the sum of its parts.

Orin Swift wines are a prime example of cutting edge blends from California that ooze appeal. Orin Swift is a small winery founded by a guy named Dave Phinney, who became a bit of a winemaking legend – first in California, now globally. He launched a \$35 wine called “The Prisoner” in 2000. That wine instantly gained a cult-like following and earned top accolades from respected critics, which repeated vintage after vintage. The Prisoner even appeared multiple times on the coveted Wine Spectator Top 100 List. Now, the label has since been sold. Twice. But it’s still wildly popular. And Dave Phinney’s other wines from Orin Swift – a winery he still owns and runs – are off-the-charts characterful expressions of Californian joy-juice.

PINOT NOIR

Pinot Noir isn’t a wine that immediately comes to mind when one thinks of California, but maybe it should. There are microclimates there that offer a huge affinity to that grape variety. And keeping with the theme of the region, the wines tend to be riper and more fruit-driven than those in cooler climates such as Burgundy without losing the elegance and finesse for which Pinot Noir is known. La Crema and Hahn always make delicious drops.

Here’s to sunshine in a glass.

“Californian wine is notoriously bottled sunshine, so with each sip, some small part of you slips away to the Golden State.”





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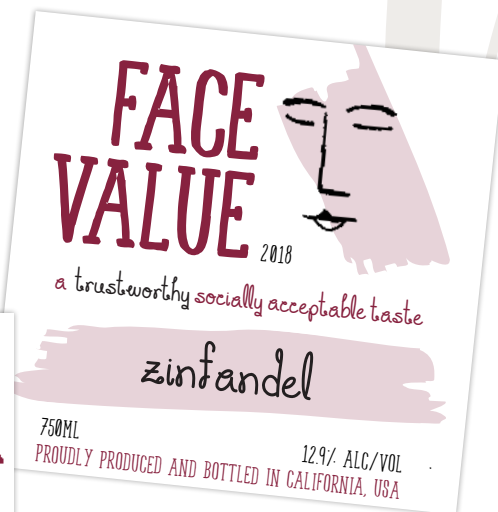
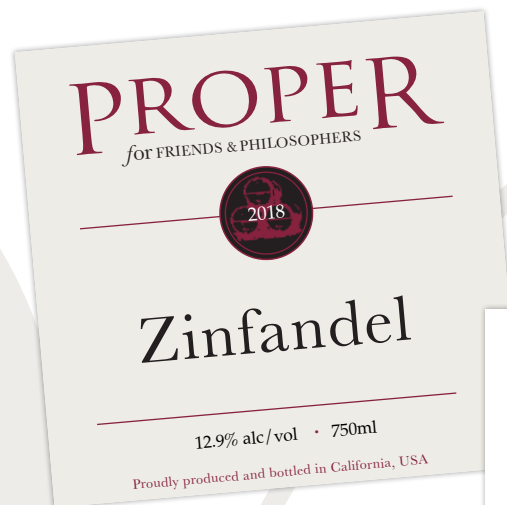


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Whereas classic Italian cooking relies on a certain purity and freshness of ingredients, and French cooking on depth of flavor in sauces and natural stocks, in Asia the emphasis is on the constant balancing and contrasting of tastes and textures.



The trick to matching wine with Asian-style cooking is to start with the premise that we need wines which will emphasize a balance, as opposed to a sheer power, of taste sensations. This is why the classic “power” wines of the world—made from grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay—are not easily matched with Asian foods. Although there is nothing wrong with intensity, the difficulty with these types of wines is that they tend to be high in alcohol, low in acid, and (in the case of Cabernet) excessively hard in tannin.



LIGHT-BODIED

Light, young Zinfandels offer fresh, fruity flavors and an approachable, easy-drinking style. Lighter Zins are typically produced with less mature grapes and little barrel aging. This style of Zin is especially enjoyable with light cheeses, roast turkey, tomato-based sauces, and Asian or Latin cuisine.

MEDIUM-BODIED

The medium-bodied Zinfandel offers more fruit flavors and tannins than the light Zin. The aging and fermentation process increases the fruity character, balance, and complexity of the wine. The medium-bodied Zin reveals the spicy nature of the varietal and offers a longer finish. An excellent complement to burgers, grilled sausages, lamb chops, and pork.

FULL-BODIED

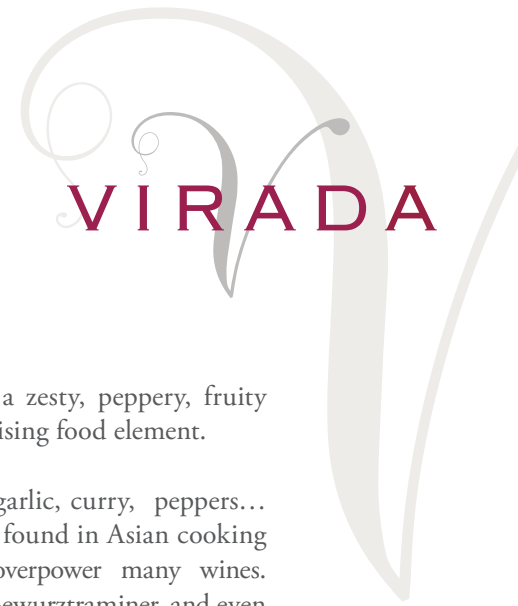
Rich and dense with intense fruit flavors and ample tannins, the full-bodied Zinfandel is typically produced from vineyards with very old vines and often with very ripe or slightly overripe grapes. Highly concentrated fruit flavors are balanced by ample tannins, making this Zinfandel ideal with heavy, robust dishes such as roast lamb, meat stews, hearty pastas, or barbecued dishes.

PORT-LIKE

Made from mature or very ripe grapes, the port-like Zin makes a great dessert wine. Enjoy it with creamy, blueveined, and mature cheeses or bitter desserts like dark chocolate cake.



The best wines for Asian foods are those with moderate levels of alcohol, softer tannin, crisper acidity, and sometimes (but not always) a judicious amount of residual sugar. It is a question of harmony and balance within the context of hot, sour, salty and sweet food sensations.



The jammy, lusciously raspberry-like, black-peppery spiced aromas and flavors of first-rate California Zinfandel are a sensible, if unorthodox, choice with barbecued pork or beef ribs coated in sweet or spicy marinades. This is especially true with Zinfandels of moderate to medium-tannin structure and when Asian chili seasonings or sauces are used. A proper Zinfandel has the red-wine tannin to handle fatty, charred meats, yet the roundness and fruitiness to enhance, rather than fight, the hot spices.

But peppery-spiced Zinfandels are also surprising with pure forms of Southeast Asian cooking, such as grilled coriander chicken served with sweet, salty, or spicy dipping sauces (nam jeem); raw beef with pepper salt; beef stir fried with spicy ginger; and hot pot dishes such as eggplant (cooked with ground pork, coriander, dried shrimp, garlic, and shallots) served with fried beef jerky. Whenever there is a presence of peppercorns, some vinegary zest, or slightly hot garlic,

chili and gingery sensations, a zesty, peppery, fruity Zinfandel finds another surprising food element.

Let's take spice first. Ginger, garlic, curry, peppers... these are common ingredients found in Asian cooking and though delicious, can overpower many wines. Fruity wines such as Riesling, Gewurztraminer, and even Zinfandel have the ability to tame heat.

In contrast, Sichuan / Hunan spicy beef is heartier and lavish, calling for something heavier, like a rustic Mourvedre or red Zinfandel blend. Both wines have sweet blackberry fruit to complement the piquant beef.



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Zinfandel is directly in the comfort zone of red wines to embrace yet not overpower many spicier Asian cuisines. Explorations in Zinfandels should be paramount to educate the wine purchasing public directly and raise awareness with restaurants for best wine pairings with regional dishes. Importers throughout Asia that do so, will profit.

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