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Journal

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Achieve the Zen of Zin

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

WINE COUNTRY: If someone put a gun to my head and said, "For the rest of your life, you can only drink one wine varietal. What'll it be?," I'd have to say the Zinfandel grape.

Why? The red Zinfandel has so many personalities. Purists insist it is the only color a Zinfandel should be, even though white Zinfandel is quite popular.

If you enjoy mysteries, then the history of this grape will interest you. Current thinking has the grape originating in Croatia, cuttings of which were analyzed by England's horticultural experts and ordered by New Englanders interested in table grapes in the 1830s. After California's gold rush fever had abated, cuttings were ordered from New England in the 1850s. The Croatian grape is also the origin of the Italian Primitivo grape, as DNA analysis has confirmed.

Although both have the same origin, the two grapes have distinctive differences. The name "Zinfandal" originated in New England nursery documents, but it is California that named it Zinfandel, and made it California's premier red wine grape with more than 50,000 acres planted as of 1998.

Suited for high desert

It is also a grape that does well in New Mexico and marries well with our local cuisine. Broadly speaking, there are a number of red Zinfandel "types." The age of the vines is one factor that affects the taste. "Old vine" Zinfandels provide the lowest yield, but usually the most intense flavors and highest alcoholic content, often more than 15 percent and a few over 16 percent.

Going one step further, "late harvest" Zinfandel grapes are picked late when the grapes become raisinlike, with concentrated sugars. These are very much like port and go well with many desserts.

It almost seems sinful to indulge in a big Zin and dark chocolate, but I must confess I've weakened more than once. You can bet the counter person at wineries specializing in Zinfandels always has lots of chocolate on hand. The chocolate is really not free, as you'll realize once you have a case of Zin tucked under your arm.

Many wineries believe the adage, "Temptation, thy name is Zinfandel," as

their names suggest. Alexander Valley Vineyard's Sin Zin was first offered in the late 1970s. After I'd tasted this robust Zinfandel, I purchased several cases. The winery now offers Temptation Zin, followed by Sin Zin and finally Redemption Zin.

Whether you will be redeemed after all that wine is anybody's guess. If those wines don't intimidate you, try Cardinal Zin and The Seven Deadly Zins, or Zin No More.

The primary grape used in California ports is also Zinfandel, but many wineries that specialize in Zinfandel don't offer a port every year. California port is different from its Portuguese brother, often being bigger with less perceived sweetness.

Zinfandel wine is classified by its region, such as the Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma, the vintage year, and sometimes the vineyard. Several of my favorite Central Coast California wineries offer as many as six Zinfandels, not counting late harvest varieties. That's part of the tremendous variety I mentioned.

Palate experiments

Primary tasting notes include "jammy" for big Zinfandels with loads of fruit and "peppery" for those with a pronounced black pepper taste, but that only begins to chart the sea of Zinfandels available for your tasting.

How do you know which types of Zinfandel suit your palate? I'm afraid there is no easy path to Zinfandel enlightenment; it will take long and careful study. Fortunately, that means tasting several different versions to train your palate. Since not many New Mexico wineries feature several Zinfandels for tasting, a wine tasting event is more revealing and definitely less expensive.

The most difficult part is disciplining yourself to only focus on the Zinfandels offered, but doing so allows you to home in on the qualities and taste components you prefer. Just repeat after me, "Only the Zinfandels, only the Zinfandels."

Of course this advice applies to any grape variety you wish to learn about.

Here's another way to determine what your taste in Zinfandel might be: Stop at your favorite wine store, pick up a few representative wines that aren't too pricey, provide crackers, baguettes and cheeses and have a wine tasting party. Better yet, have your guests bring the wine and you provide the food. Salut!

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