

## **Zinfandel has long history in wine-making**

When we talk about wine culture in California or the U.S. for that matter, no other grape varietal is synonymous with wine than the zinfandel grape.

Zinfandel has a long history in wine-making, from its meagre start in New England, to its transplanting in California prior to the Gold Rush years (mid 1850s) up to the high demand of today. Zinfandel was for many years somewhat of a mystery grape; from its origin, its connection to the Primitivo grape of Puglia, Italy, to its arrival in America, it is now considered an indigenous grape to the U.S.

Let's take a closer look at this elusive grape with a brief description of its history, production and place in California's wine market.

By consulting the history books, the first mention of the zinfandel grape in the U.S. comes from transcripts dating to the 1820s when a New York nurseryman by the name of Georges Gibbs brought back various cuttings of grapevines from the Imperial Austrian plant species from his travels in Europe. After planting these cuttings in a controlled environment and cultivating the resulting vines for a couple of years, Gibbs noted that the samplings corresponding to the vine they called 'zenfendel' or 'zinfindal' produced hardy grapes and in very good yields.

For the next 20 years, the zinfandel grape became a popular table grape in the Northeast U.S., after which it was transported and rooted in California under the watchful eye of Frederick Macondray in the 1840s and later on of Agoston Harazsthy.

The transplanted grape varietal soon proved to thrive in the warmer climate of California and was appreciated by the many immigrants that came for the Gold Rush. They noted that the zinfandel grape produced wine similar to those of their countries of origin (Italy and East European countries). For the following 80 years, the zinfandel grape grew in popularity and even Prohibition in the 1920s and 1930s couldn't slow down its consumption. It gained in production in the northern regions of California up until the 1950s.

As other grape varieties, such as chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, began to gain in popularity, zinfandel was relegated to producing mainly jug wine in the hot central regions of California. A large surplus in the 1980s led to the production of white zinfandel which was made by shortening the contact time with the skins during the fermentation process or by blending the zinfandel juice with light, fruity varieties such as riesling. The sweeter, lighter wine (named Blush) was an instant hit and the true more full-bodied red version was relegated to the brink of obscurity.

During the 1990s, a few wineries took it upon themselves to produce wonderful reds from the zinfandel grape. Wineries such as Ridge, Turley and Ravenswood introduced high-class red zinfandels and paved the way to today's much-appreciated full-bodied, well-balanced, rich and fruit filled wines. Red zinfandel wines show flavours of ripe red berries (blackberry, raspberry and cranberry), spice and earthy tones. You will also find underlying notes of sweetness brought on by the over-ripeness of the grape during harvesting.

All major growing regions from California are now producing excellent versions of zinfandel wine and those labeled with 'old vine' are particularly good. The vines producing wines carrying the old vine label are in general between 40 and 100 years old. With these older vines, the average yields are much lower and the resulting fruit is of higher quality. The zinfandel vine produces, on average, higher yields and is known to ripen earlier in comparison to other full-bodied red grapes such as cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Also, the zinfandel grape is not prone to rot or disease as much as the aforementioned grape varieties.

Zinfandel is not without its faults. The high sugar content can lead to very high alcohol content with levels of 15 per cent abv and higher not uncommon. Also, the zinfandel grape has a tendency toward uneven ripening where grapes can range from green and hard, to raisin-y and overripe on single grape clusters. This affects the harvesting process where more than one pass through the vineyard is required during harvest time, thus costing more in labor. Due to its above-average alcohol content, zinfandel can taste a bit hot or have volatile acidity which makes the wines a bit unstable and prone to a short lifespan. This means that certain zinfandels cannot be aged as well as certain cabernet sauvignons.

Other than location and vintage, the producer and winery have their say in the quality of the zinfandel produced. When buying zinfandel, look for wines produced in the Lodi or Dry Creek Valley regions where the producers have shown continuous wines of higher quality. Zinfandel accounts for almost 2 per cent of U.S. sales and is constantly increasing year over year.

Recent research (2001) has linked zinfandel to the primitivo grape that is grown for the most part in the Puglia region of Italy (lower heel part). With modern scientific equipment and research in DNA profiling, it has shown that zinfandel and primitivo are genetic twins. Both of these varieties are descendants of one common grape that is from Croatia named Crljenak. All three of these varieties show similar growing profiles in yields, berry flavour, sugar content, early ripening and disease and rot resistance.

As mentioned, the zinfandel grape shows notes of red and blackberry flavours, layered with notes of spice, oak and vanilla. Perfect pairing for these robust wines are grilled and braised red meats or wild game. To bring the pairing to an even higher level, add some nice barbecue sauce. The tangy and spicy notes along with the jammy fruit component present in your typical barbecue sauces will pair nicely with the balanced fruit forwardness and underlying sweetness demonstrated by quality zinfandels.

Don't be afraid to pair nice juicy loaded hamburgers with zinfandel. Another food pairing that might surprise you is our holiday favourite turkey dinner with all the trimmings. The sweet cranberry sauce, flavourful sweet potatoes, spicy and herbal stuffing and thick and meaty gravy all pair well with the zinfandel flavors.

Here are some great Californian zinfandel single varieties or blends available at your local NB Liquor store:

- Ravenswood Vintners Zinfandel, 750 ml \$16.99. This wine shows notes of ripe red berries with an underlying of oak and spiciness.
- Gnarly Head Old Vine Zinfandel, 750 ml \$19.99. A fuller-bodied version with ripe raspberry flavours, spice (think anise and licorice) and a touch of smokiness.

- Twisted Old Vine Zinfandel, 750 ml \$14.99. A relative new product that is dominated by ripe blackberry flavours, hints of cocoa and vanilla in the finish. The little sweetness on the finish rounds out nicely with the oak on the back palate.
- Folie a Deux Ménage a Trois, 750 ml \$20.29, Apothic Red, 750 ml \$17.99, and Bear Flag Red, 750 ml \$12.99 are all blended red wines where zinfandel takes centre stage.

These three products all show hints of ripe red fruit (cherries and raspberries) notes of cocoa, chocolate, spice and vanilla. These wines are friendly and easy-drinking, and make a good starting point to discover the zinfandel grape. Some of you might find these wines a bit sweet by themselves but paired with spicier foods the sweetness is balanced out.

So while looking for new types of wine to sample, do try the zinfandel grape either in blends or alone and I am sure will not be disappointed.

Written by Marcel Richard, a product advisor at NB Liquor's Dieppe store.