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The state of American zinfandel today

When I fell in love with wine, I fell in love with zinfandel. My wife and I developed our palates during vacations in California, with each successive visit devoted less to national parks or city landmarks and more to wine country. We'd try anything, but when we came back home it was zinfandel that captivated us with its wild, swashbuckling flavors and its devil-may-care sense of adventure. It transported us back to the West, a faraway land where we'd say we were from Washington and it would take a few minutes before someone would ask, "Oh, you mean D.C.?"

Over the years, we grew away from zinfandel. Our palates favored the more subtle, elegant and earthier wines of the Old World over the overtly fruity New World style. As we aged, restraint became a virtue: Less oak and less alcohol, please; a wine to dance with our meal rather than overpower it.

Zinfandel, meanwhile, moved in the opposite direction. In the late 1980s and early '90s, it was an endangered species, known primarily in its incarnation as white zinfandel, the slightly sweet pink wine that saved the grape from obscurity and helped turn many soda swillers into wine drinkers. At that time, winemakers, retailers and sommeliers commonly told of customers who insisted, "Zinfandel is not a red wine!"

Then something happened. "No wimpy wines!" became the battle cry of zin lovers. Production of zinfandel more than doubled between 1985 and 1995. (Tonnage has fluctuated but remained fairly consistent since, although white zinfandel still accounts for about 80 percent of the grape's production, according to the Wine Institute.) A fan club formed; Zinfandel Advocates and Producers celebrated its 20th anniversary last month in San Francisco. Zin became huge, a steroidal caricature of itself, a victim of excessive extraction and monstrously high alcohol.

Or did it? It's easy to make such generalizations, so I decided to test my modern anti-zin bias. Most California wines are higher in alcohol than they were two decades ago, after all, though that trend is most pronounced with zinfandel. "Fourteen percent used to be a high-alcohol zin, but now it's a starting point," said John Williams, owner and winemaker at Frog's Leap winery in Napa Valley. Frog's Leap's zinfandel clocks in at a modest 13.5 percent. "Believe me, it's a lot easier to make a zin at 17 percent than 13.5," he said.

Williams credited "our forefathers of zinfandel" with planting other grape varieties among the zin vines in their vineyards: petite sirah and carignan, primarily. "If you pick them all at the same time and ferment them together in the same tank, the other grapes moderate the zinfandel's natural alcohol level," Williams explained. Such "field blends" were largely abandoned with the zinfandel craze of the '90s, when bigger expressions of 100 percent zinfandel became the norm.

Frog's Leap Zinfandel is about 80 percent zin, with the rest petite sirah and a smidgen of carignan, according to the winery's Web site. (The label does not divulge the blend, unfortunately.) It is beautifully nuanced, with raspberry and cranberry flavors encased in an earthy robe of woody spice.

The winery that has most upheld the traditional field-blend ideal of zinfandel is Ridge Vineyards. Most of Ridge's blends are not labeled as zinfandel, because the grape does not reach the minimum 75 percent level for variety labeling. And their alcohol rarely strays above 15 percent. But they are age-worthy and beautifully structured wines. Ridge's flagship zinfandel blend is labeled simply Geyserville, for the town in northern Sonoma County near the vineyard. Though pricey, at nearly \$40, it is not to be missed by zin fiends.

Through the years I have occasionally dipped back into the rising ocean of zinfandel. My favorites tend to come from Sonoma County, specifically Dry Creek Valley. Zins from Dry Creek Vineyards, Quivira and Dashe have been reliably good; not necessarily field blends, but on the restrained side. Every now and then, I like to return to my roots. ✦



Recommended zins (Deb Lindsey/for The Washington Post)