

Growers, consumers return to red Zinfandel

It seems as though this is as good a time as any to announce a resurrection. It is actually a bit overdue. In the early days of the California wine explosion in the 1970s, one of the important wines was Zinfandel.

Grown only in California, except for some minor efforts in Oregon, its origins are obscure. But it has been an amazingly adaptable grape, producing wines that reflect their viticultural origins more than most.



wine
Richard Watson

Grown in mountains under conditions of high stress, it can be intense, complex and deliciously fruity. Grown in a hot valley it produces huge amounts of wine. It can be fresh, deep, bright, tannic, full-some, simple and clean, depending on the farmers who grow it and, to a lesser extent, the nature of its viticulture.

In the late '70s and early '80s, California wine growers, in an effort to establish a California style, went a bit bonkers with this and a few other grapes. But especially Zinfandel. It is adaptable. They produced many huge, tannic monsters, full of alcohol and concentrated flavors. It became fashionable to make it something other than a civilized wine for the table. It became a conversation piece.

FINALLY THE PUBLIC rebelled

In the only way it has. It stopped buying it.

Desperate, the winemakers turned their Zinfandel grapes into a new commodity, the White Zinfandel. And they made a lot of money doing so. The popularity of that wine is now legendary, of course. Its consumption kept a great many Zinfandel plants in the soil that otherwise would have been bidden over to other varieties.

Now true, red (as it must be qualified) Zinfandel seems to be returning to our favor. Reviews of recent vintages have been good, sales are up and the wines can be used to accompany food: full of grace, charm and the distinctive fruit of berries and currants. Some are more complex than others, some cost as much as fine Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir, some will benefit from aging and others should be drunk now.

Those from Sonoma are, with some notable exceptions, the superior lot. In part, they are from wineries that were not around when the earlier monsters were made. Excellent examples from the Valley of the Moon include Richardson, Lytton Springs, Gundlach-Bundschu, Ravenswood, Haywood, Preston, Mark West, Nalle and Hacienda.

Four of these are from around the city of Sonoma and are neighbors: Richardson, Gundlach-Bundschu, Haywood and Ravenswood. The first two have won major awards of late, both producing wines of depth and substance. The Haywood tends to show more class and finesse.

FROM THE DRY CREEK area of Sonoma more to the northwest, the most notable Zinfandel releases have come from Nalle. A small producer (actually made at Quivera by the winemaker there, Doug Nalle), we are fortunate to have their 1986 edition available here. Rich in fruit and with good acid and structure, this one is a treasure, well worth its \$9 pricetag.

Napa produces a fair share of fine Zinfandels as well, though it is not really prime country for the grape. From the low foothills at the north-

ern end of the valley, Storybook Mountain has produced an excellent selection of select Zinfandels (and that is all it produces) for nearly a decade now. Owner Jerry Seps began in the lean years, held out well and will now benefit from the grape's growing popularity. There are Griggs Hills and La Jota (though at \$14 and \$16 the bottle they are well beyond what most people expect to pay for a Zinfandel), Beeher (still producing wines on the hefty side), Burgess and Sky.

Below Napa, Ridge Vineyards in Santa Clara has long been a Zinfandel master, producing several issues, each vintage from different growing regions throughout the state. Finally, some of the newer issues from the Amador area in the foothills of the Sierra-Nevadas to the east are showing real promise now that they have ceased making monsters: Santino, Amador Foothill and Sheendondah.

A true treasure of choices which to welcome back this noble grape. Most are priced in the \$7-10 range and will equally complement one's cellar as well as one's table in its time.

Perhaps some of the white Zinfandel drinkers are beginning to expand their horizons.

Friends reunite

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Hills, on the Cranbrook campus. For ticket information, call 645-1874.

This performance ends the six-week season for kids ages 8-13. Wonnberger, who founded the Children's Theatre with her late husband Carl Wonnberger in 1941, will produce three shows during the coming season. Youngsters ages 14 through college age will do "The Family Upstairs," a comedy about bluffing mothers trying to marry off their daughters, by Harry Dell, on Tuesday-Wednesday, Aug. 2-3.

"The Innocents," a gothic drama about a governess and two children, by William Archibald, based on Henry James' classic "Turn of the Screw," will be done Friday-Saturday, Aug. 5-6.

"Women in White," a mystery comedy by James Reisch, will finish the season on Tuesday-Wednesday, Aug. 9-10. "Women in White" is a suspense-filled play about the lives of a troop of nurses during the Korean war. A murder is solved while multiple plots work their way to a satisfying conclusion. All performances are at 8 p.m. at the amphitheater. In case of rain, performances will move indoors to St. Dunstan's. Call 645-1874 for information about tickets, or Cranbrook Children's Theatre.

The St. Dunstan area has been designated a national historical site. Work will begin at the end of this season to rebuild the site as it was. Wonnberger is looking forward to the dedication ceremony in 1991. It will also be a celebration of her 50th season at the Cranbrook Children's Theatre. Keller is also looking forward to being at her old friend's side at the dedication.

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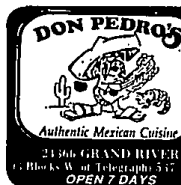
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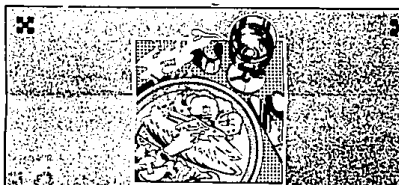


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