The Return of the Zin

The current popularity of red Zinfandel gives the lie to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s observation about the paucity of second acts in American lives. A late nineteenth-century favorite, the zinfandel grape has weathered Prohibition-induced neglect; the near-total eclipse of its star by chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, and other transplanted European varietals; and, when it was most often seen in white Zinfandel wine, the hoots and jeers of the oenological cognoscenti. Now in its (by this count) fifth act, zin has re-emerged as an early twenty-first-century viticultural darling, inspiring a weird, almost evangelical passion and commanding prices that would have seemed laughable just twenty years ago. If it weren’t for the dynamic complexity of the wine’s taste, one could, perhaps, chalk up its current trendiness to the vagaries of fashion, or even to patriotism—zinfandel, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, is North America’s only native wine grape. But a good red Zinfandel wine is big, broad, and mouth-filling, with a remarkable range and depth of flavors, from jam to licorice to tobacco to dried fruit to roast meat. Its taste is almost narrative in the way it unfolds in the mouth.

Zinfandel is the most chameleonic of grapes. It can be made into anything from wine coolers to a sweet, pinkish wine to a generic table wine to a beautifully deep (not to mention prestigious and expensive) red wine. Until the late 1970s, the main product made from zinfandel grapes was “white Zin,” a sweet, inexpensive, and unsophisticated wine. Since then, however, the demand for more expensive claret-style red Zins has increased dramatically. In response, the market has provided a range of wines as varied in taste and style as single-malt Scotch; they are similarly produced in a relatively small area. Just as the difference in taste between, say, Laphraoig and Glenmorangie Scotch has led to speculation about the gustatory effect of dents in the still, so the difference between Ravenswood and Storybook Scotch has led to speculation about irrigation, soil quality, and pruning practice. For instance, should vines be “head-trained” (encouraged to grow vertically) or should they sprawl? How much water do they need? Should the grapes grow fat and juicy or shriveled and concentrated? Do they grow best in rocky, dry soil or in wetter, clumpier soil? And if you happen to own a vineyard with wet soil and you want your wine to taste more like one from a drier region, what can you do about it?

Vintners, oenologists, and professors of viticulture have been pondering these questions in relation to Zinfandel for years. The fundamental question, of course, is how do you make the wine taste better or, in this case, what makes a better Zin? Given that vines in a row vary (just as people in a row would), can we select and propagate the best possible vine? And given that soil aridity and alkalinity vary, is the best vine in northern Sonoma County the same as the best vine in southern Amador County? The answers to these questions and many others lie in an unusual library located in California’s southern Napa Valley.

This library is nestled between St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church and a Carmelite monastery, on one-and-a-half acres on the outskirts of Oakville, in the foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains. It is owned by the University of California and presided over by Jason Benz, a genial, wiry man. This library, however, has no walls, floors, or ceilings, and no readers or card catalogs, for its holdings are not books. Rather, this is a library of zinfandel grapes. While the area under cultivation may appear to be just another Napa Valley vineyard, it in fact represents a living history of this important grape. The Heritage Vineyard, as this project is called, is the brainchild of James Wolpert, who serves as Chair of the Viticulture and Enology Department at the University of California (UC), Davis, and also as head of a consortium known as ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates and Producers). Wolpert believes that the vineyard, planted fourteen years ago, will continue to be studied “easily for a generation, [and] way beyond me.” The single most ambitious genealogical study ever of a New World grape, Heritage Vineyard is the result of equal parts curiosity and Zin-fueled passion.

Zinfandel grapes grow large and sweet both quickly and easily, making them perfect for cheap, unsophisticated wine. Until fairly recently, if you picked up a bottle labeled “Zinfandel,” all too often you would find a saccharine, pale pink wine, which smelled and tasted like pediatric amoxicillin. In the early 1960s, though, California vintners started treating the grapes differently. Paul Draper, co-founder of Ridge Vineyards, explains: “We started treating zinfandel
like it was cabernet sauvignon,” meaning that they took the
time, effort, and expense to turn the grapes into a fine red
wine. According to Draper, until Ridge started playing with
the grape, fine red Zins “hadn’t been [made] since the thir-
ties”—a provocative assertion, to be sure. The fact is that
the history of the zinfandel grape is murky; and despite its
classification as an American native, its story actually begins
somewhere in Europe.

Precisely where zinfandel comes from depends on
whom you ask: Hungary, southern Italy, Vienna, and the
Dalmatian coast of Croatia have all been inconclusively
cited as the grape’s birthplace.3 We do know that zinfandel
arrived in the United States in the early nineteenth century
as a table grape. In apparent contradiction to its European
origins, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms
(BATF) has recognized zinfandel as a native grape. This
classification is not as strange as it might initially seem: as
oenologist David Darlington notes in Angels’ Visits: An
Inquiry into the Mystery of Zinfandel, “The world’s oldest
zinfandel vines…are growing in California…For better or
worse, Zinfandel has been California’s native contribution
to the international world of wine.”4 In any case, long before
the BATF conferred Americanness on the grape, vintners
and wine enthusiasts had discovered that zinfandel grows
best in the dry, temperate climate of California. And
California winemakers were interested in turning the grape
into a unique and recognizable wine.

If making zinfandel native did little to clear up the
grape’s murky past, it also failed to resolve two huge problems
confronting vintners and oenophiles partial to Zinfandel
wine. First, despite the late twentieth-century fad, zinfandel
lagged far behind merlot, cabernet sauvignon, and chardonnay
in production and profitability; vintners looking for faster
profit would routinely plow under old-vine zinfandel and
plant a more marketable grape. Second, if a vintner wanted
to obtain practical genetic information about his vines—if
an Amador County vintner, for instance, wanted to know
how his clusters and berries compared in size to others in
his county, region, or state—he had no place to go. By
contrast, many Bordeaux vineyards have been active for a
millennium and, as James Wolpert says, “If you want [infor-
mation on] cabernet sauvignon or merlot, you go to
Bordeaux or Loire. For syrah you go to the Rhône Valley,
or sangiovese in Chianti and pinot noir in Burgundy. The
problem with zinfandel is, if you don’t like your [vines],
what do you do?”

In 1989, Wolpert began to build an answer to that ques-
tion. He and Amand Kasimatis, an emeritus professor of
viticulture at UC Davis, asked several of the university’s farm
advisors (field adjuncts to the Viticulture and Enology
Department stationed in counties across California) where
to find the oldest zinfandel plantings. That same year
Wolpert, Kasimatis, Napa County farm advisor Ed Weber,
and Sonoma County farm advisor Rhonda Smith began
touring the state on “zin safaris,” in search of zinfandel
vines that had been planted before 1930. Old-vine zin plant-
ings littered the state, especially in Sonoma; unfortunately,
they were disappearing at an alarming rate. In one case,
Wolpert and his companions barely beat the tractor coming
to plow up a venerable zin vineyard. When they found a
vine they would, with the owner’s permission, take a clip-
ning, graft it onto hardy St. George rootstock, and plant it in
a 0.76 acre plot on the University’s experimental vineyard in
Oakville. This plot came to be called the Heritage Vineyard.
On the first set of safaris, Wolpert and Kasimatis brought back field selections from Sonoma, Napa, Contra Costa, San Luis Obispo, and San Joaquin counties. They planted sixty-three vines from this first phase: fifty-seven culled from the zin safaris, three zinfandel specimens already in UC Davis’s collection, and three primitive clippings from Italy. A second set of twenty-seven clippings from regions and vineyards they had missed the first time brought the total to ninety. Wolpert would like to carry out one more set of searches, especially in the Sierra Madre Foothills. However, the Heritage Vineyard is already moving into its third phase, that of propagation.

In 2002 Wolpert and Jason Benz, the Heritage Vineyard manager, took twenty-three of the cleanest (healthiest) vines and began replicating them in quantities sufficient to yield about half a ton of grapes from each selected vine. While this sounds like a lot of grapes, it is roughly the minimum yield needed to make wine in a fashion similar to that practiced by commercial vintners. Since 1997, the Heritage Vineyard has been yielding a yearly total of a ton and a half of grapes, enough, by Wolpert’s calculation, for about two hundred gallons of wine. (Last year, 102 cases of wine were produced, but unless you attend ZAP’s annual auction, where Heritage Vineyard Zin is sold to fund the project, you will probably never taste it.)

Can a commercial vintner hope to learn anything from this project? Does the idea of growing a zinfandel library actually appeal to industry, or is it of benefit only to science? Some of the answers to these questions lie in Ridge Winery’s Lytton Springs East Vineyard. Lytton Springs is at the end of Highway 12, which cuts through the high-end olive oil boutiques and chic food stores of Napa Valley, then veers through the rolling hills, pine thickets, and vineyards of the wilder, less developed Sonoma County. The vineyard sits at the northern edge of Sonoma, where the Alexander, Dry Creek, and Russian River valleys converge. When I showed up, construction of a new winery, with walls of rice-straw bales held in place by steel beams, was in full swing. The straw bales not only give the winery a wonderfully loamy, farm smell, they also regulate the heat, keeping the winery cool even in hot, humid weather.

Most of the vines here date back to the nineteenth century—the oldest block was planted in 1882—and Ridge has been turning out first-rate Zinfandel wines from these vines for forty years. The vines themselves are, at first glance, remarkably unhealthy-looking. Gnarled, dull brown, low, knotted and twisted, they look like midget osteoporotic oak trees about one chilly week away from death. In fact, barring unforeseen catastrophe, these vines will probably outlast anyone reading this article, and on closer inspection their haleness and readable history are impressive. Termites have chewed through the bases of most of the vines—David Gates, Ridge’s Vice-President for Vineyard Operations, assures me that termite holes are a sure sign of age—and black widows and scorpions live in the knots, but the grapes look purple and healthy, taste sweet, and break firm, almost crunchy, in the mouth.

The vineyard manager, John Olney, refers scornfully to vintners who “plant by trend, by the pocketbook,” who would have plowed up these thirty-six acres of prime zinfandel grapes for merlot, cabernet, or another reliable but less interesting varietal. “During the 1970s,” Olney explains, “people were tearing out zin, because there was no real market. People were planting chardonnay, cabernet, things on the upward trend, so Ridge, in a way, had its own heritage program going on,” if only by dint of the decision to preserve its old vines in the face of countervailing (and probably more profitable) trends. Olney, a reedy, soft-spoken guy with a reserved manner that belies his obvious passion for wine and for his vineyard, is a perfect temperamental counterpart to David Gates, whose manner alternates between geniality and intensity. Gates seems like he’s still the smartest kid in the class, answering questions eagerly and volubly; if the Heritage Vineyard is a living zinfandel library, then David Gates is a living viticultural encyclopedia. Free of cant or pretense, Gates enthused about Wolpert’s project as he walked me up and down the rows of vines. “The Heritage Vineyard does two things I’m really excited about,” he said. “One, it saves a lot of germ plasm—this is the genetics of a vine. I wish they had five times the representation, but there’s just not enough space. I’m interested to see how much variability there is in old vines in California. Second, I’m interested in seeing what differences shake out.” These interests—conservation and information—match Wolpert’s objectives perfectly, and Gates is certain that the Heritage Vineyard will give him the information he seeks.

Other zinfandel producers echo Gates’s enthusiasm for the Heritage Vineyard, an enthusiasm apparent in ZAP’s funding of the project. ZAP’s founder, Jerry Seps—a former professor of German history at Stanford who worked his way through the University of California, Berkeley as a sommelier—praised not only the project’s soundness, but also the way Wolpert runs it: “Jim Wolpert has made this into a public project. ZAP volunteers could go up to the vineyard for lunch and see what’s going on there…[It] draws upon and benefits everyone in the state; it’s not just for Napa growers or Central Coast growers. It makes a presentation to all
[who] are interested in zinfandel.” Seps owns and runs Storybook Vineyards in Calistoga, not far from Oakville, a fairly small operation that makes some of the finest and mellowest Zinfandel around. Like his wine, Seps is dulcet and calm; he’s a born teacher who started ZAP as a way to bring zinfandel producers and drinkers together and teach them more about wine. ZAP began with a handful of vintners “in a back room, saying, ‘What can we do?’” It now boasts five thousand advocate members and almost two hundred producers.

The only reservations about the project came from Paul Draper and John Olney. Draper said that “the problem with producing wine from such a collection is that [the grapes] may not be planted in the ideal soil and climate for Zin and therefore may not produce some of the finer Zin.” However, even if he was giving a subtle plug for his northern Sonoma location over the Heritage Vineyard’s southern Napa soil, he praised the project’s basic soundness. Olney echoed Draper’s concern: “We have an interest in participating in…a ‘heritage program’ of our own in Sonoma County, which has really been the most consistent source of great Zinfandel. The bottom of Napa, Oakville, isn’t really the best soil: it’s too rich.”

In fact, the Heritage Vineyard soil looks dry, almost dusty, tawny-colored and clumpy, like the beginning of a desert. But the soil, far from being unhealthy, might be a bit too rich for zinfandel grapes, as Olney suggests. “Irrigation is kept to a minimum,” explains vineyard manager Jason Benz, pointing to the dripping black hoses snaking through the rows of vines. Farmers have traditionally dry-farmed zinfandel because the grapes naturally grow so big and cluster so tightly that rot can easily occur. One grape inevitably splits, and botrytis sets in, ruining the entire cluster. Benz and Wolpert prize looser clusters with smaller berries, which mean not just less rot but better flavor and color from the high proportion of skin to flesh. The water coming from the hoses one drop at a time looks more like a leak than irrigation, but the vines themselves look healthy: multiple clusters, verdant foliage, strong roots and branches.

Benz explains that because the project seeks information on grape and cluster size, he thins the vines less than a commercial vintner would. Thinning refers to the practice of discarding entire clusters of grapes, leaving only one per branch to receive all of the sugar that flows from the leaves. On the ground, between rows of vines, lie clusters of grapes in different stages of raisining: some full berries just starting to bleach in the sun, some shriveled and leaking a rich, viscous juice, and some dried-out soil-colored raisin husks still on the branch, like a miniature tree of skulls.

Benz, Gates, Wolpert, Olney, Draper, and Seps display the same kind of excitement when they talk about this project: this is neither the obsessiveness of a collector, nor the salivary recollection and anticipation of a hedonist, nor the snobbery of a wine connoisseur. This is the pleasure of a cook tinkering with a complex recipe. Wine is not simply a drink in a bottle; it is a system, an intellectual and sensual quest for perfection, like writing, or cooking, or music. The vintner’s practices change subtly from region to region, and also year to year, depending on rainfall, the aridity of the soil, and the desired flavor of the wine. Wine’s journey from soil to bottle (from soil to mouth, actually) is beset by countless variables. For instance, Wolpert talked about the problem of barrel-toasting, a crucial part of the wine-making process, which few oenophiles even consider. Vintners age wine in barrels they often hold over a fire first, to bring out the natural sugars in the oak. Wolpert consults with them about minute changes in flavor depending on how long the barrel is in contact with the flame.

In conversation, Wolpert stressed the importance of balancing academic and commercial interests. The Heritage Vineyard seems perfectly poised between the two, extending roots and branches into both arenas. From Seps’s handful of vintners in a back room with nothing but passion, a history has grown—is literally growing—from the earth. This project will not merely fill gaps in viticultural knowledge, it will also contribute to the production of superior wine. Zinfandel inspires a special passion. As John Olney explains: “These are wines of terroir. There’s something going on here—when you put your nose in the glass, it has extra depth, extra balance, extra character. The grape seems to have found the perfect soil, so it creates on its own a perfect balance.”

NOTES
1. “I once thought that there were no second acts in American lives.” From “My Lost City.”
2. The zinfandel grape originally came from Europe. In modern oenology, however, zinfandel is considered a New World grape because the wine bearing its name comes mainly, and originally, from California. Although this classification is historically inaccurate, it is the accepted convention in the wine world.
3. For further information, see www.zinfandel.org, the home page of ZAP.
5. Primitivo is an Italian grape frequently cited as a possible source for zinfandel.