

Zinfandel : A great American grape

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John Fields is general manager of Grapevine Wine and Spirits and co-owner of Grapevine Partners LLC.

I've always liked to pull for the underdog. The underdog keeps punching despite the odds, even if he doesn't win. The underdog also often has more character, unbreakable will and sometimes does rise to the top, gaining the respect of his peers.

It's only fitting that my love of all things American gives me a profound respect for the underdog of the American wine market: zinfandel.

The sweet blush version is produced from the same grape, but I'm talking about the luscious, medium-bodied, peppery red that so many American wine consumers have learned to love. Zinfandel is originally from Croatia but gained prominence during the Roman Empire and in Italy, where it's known as primitivo. It came to America in the early 1800s and has flourished here ever since.

Industry insiders often seem to scoff at zinfandel. For example, wine writers may speak highly of a zinfandel only to finish a review with caveats that make it seem as if they're embarrassed or unwilling to put a zin alongside the "big three" (cabernet, chardonnay and merlot).

In recent years, the American wine market has seen the emergence of new and exciting grapes, such as pinot noir. But through the trends and fads, zinfandel has never faded from popularity. And like a good underdog, Zin has been evolving while many weren't paying much attention.

Zinfandel has, quite literally, come of age. Many American zinfandel vines are now quite old because it's such a hardy vine, and many wineries have old-vine zinfandel (50-plus-year-old vines) in their lineups that offer style, character and depth.

Both novice and expert wine drinkers can usually enjoy a good zin due to the amazing array of styles and flavors the grape can put in the bottle. As a general rule of thumb, zins grown in hot areas of California, such as Lodi and Paso Robles, tend to be jammy, fruity, rich and spicy, ending in that characteristic

black pepper finish. Zins grown in areas that are typically cooler, such as Sonoma's Dry Creek, Russian River Valley and parts of Napa, are darker in their flavors, with raspberry, black cherry, blackberry and pepper. I prefer this style, because it's a bit tamer, but many of my customers like the "big fruit jam" style for all its power, flavor and expressiveness.

When this Tennessee wine guy wants to go American, there's no better juice than zinfandel to back up my Southern, red sauce-covered BBQ and baked beans on the patio grill or smoker. This grape won't be an underdog forever!

FOUR TO TRY

Plungerhead Lodi Old Vine Zinfandel 2008, \$13.99. This wine is a staff and customer favorite. It really delivers at an affordable price. Huge dark berry flavors lead into a chocolate-like finish and a nice, light spice.

Lake Sonoma Winery Dry Creek Zinfandel 2007, \$18.99. This is not your everyday zinfandel. It has much more depth, smokiness and power, but finishes quietly and subtle. This is my kind of zin — it has it all, without being too "jammy."

Brazin Dry Creek Old Vine Zinfandel 2007, \$16.99. This bottle is best described as zin with a zing. It has a great acidity that really brings a wow factor. It's not as heavy as some, and the balance makes it an easy-sipping zin. Great pepper notes and fruit, too.

Four Vines "The Biker" Paso Robles Zinfandel, \$28.99. This beast scored 93 points from the folks at Wine Spectator. It is simply huge, from start to finish. Superb layers of flavor integrate into a lingering finish. You'll need a new toothbrush after this one.