

## Zinfandel has Charms, But What Is All This Mania We're Seeing?

By Dan Berger

SAN FRANCISCO – The scene, according to those who were here a year ago, was calmer this year. If so, it must have really been Mardi Gras.

It was the ZAP tasting at the Herbst Pavilion at Fort Mason Center here last Saturday, and what a scene it was. The press-trade portion of the event started at 11:30 a.m. and though we showed up on time, the lines had already formed for the public portion – while some wineries hadn't even yet set up. Indeed, I saw more “press” and more “trade” than I have ever seen at a putative trade tasting event, and it should be obvious what the quotation marks mean.

I added to the throng, and I tried to “do” the event sanely, tasting no barrel samples and only looking at wines already released, or at least bottled and soon-to-be.

Now, if you are among the uninitiated, you might think ZAP had to have been a sampling of the greatest wine in the world, such as First Growth Bordeaux, Champagne, Premier Cru Burgundy, or vintage Port. Strange to say, then: well over 4,000 people, some of whom traveled hundreds of miles, fought heavy traffic, gave up a Saturday of absolutely gorgeous clear weather (after weeks of rain), jammed the parking lots around Ft. Mason for more than a mile, and paid between \$35 and \$50 each to sip generally raw, harsh red wine made from the modest Zinfandel grape.

ZAP stands for Zinfandel Advocates and Producers, a loose-knit assemblage of folks who revere the Zinfandel grape as if it provided an orgasmic experience, and the way the masses massed here, you'd have been a believer too. Heck, even San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, wearing his fashionable brown fedora, showed up to christen the thing over a bullhorn, speaking eloquently (I assume; I couldn't hear a thing he said and I was only twenty feet away) about how Zinfandel would cure AIDS, heal broken homes, and create world peace. Or something.

Considering the fact that the line leading to the pavilion at 2 p.m. wound its way around the Ft. Mason parking lot to the door of the great Green's restaurant, which is about a third of a mile; considering that more than 100 wineries were pouring an average of two wines each, and considering that Zinfandel has a fairly high average alcohol, the 1998 went off without a hitch. “It's a lot calmer in here this year,” said one wine maker, referring to excessive consumption by some in '97.

As late as 4:30 p.m., half an hour before the formal close, people were still paying the at-the-door \$50 charge to zip in and zap. An amazing show, all things considered.

This mania for Zinfandel seems to have developed rather

rapidly, and in the last three years this event has become A Wine Happening to rival any. Not only was it the Saturday tasting, but the Zinfandel weekend also included a walkaround dinner at Rosenbloom Cellars nearby, at \$90 per person, which included an auction.

Beneficiary of this charity event was the Heritage Vineyard Foundation, which operates a vital test vineyard in Oakville under the directorship of Dr. James Wolpert of UC Davis.

If you are an old-timer in the wine game (if you've been enjoying wine for seven years, you qualify as an old-timer), you might be as amused about this as I am. I mean, I love Zinfandel too, but not this much. And though it's great that Zinfandel has regained the stature it had briefly some 20 years ago, today the nation has far more wine lovers than in the 1970s, and the current mania is great for all who think Merlot is a rather lackluster red wine.

Yet I have another view about this Million Person March on Ft. Mason. Zinfandel is a grape that makes wine best suited for foods like pasta, lamb, beef, and other hearty fare, and best made as a sort of deeply wrought Cru Beaujolais or Claret. What (apparently) drew the attention of many at the tasting last weekend was power, weight, intensity, and a generally huge construction. Which means that the best at last Saturday's tasting were all but ignored.

### Zinfandel Starring Arnold Schwarzenegger

The sudden interest in Zinfandel kind of reminds me of the excitement Americans have for special effects-laden movies. Think of the films that have done well at the box office (in terms of gross revenues). What connects them are the explosions and special effects: Independence Day, Con Air, Titanic, all those Rambo movies. Zinfandel is like that.

Zinfandel is flashy. Many are made with 15% alcohol and more. No self-respecting Cabernet producer would have that level of heat, but with Zinfandel, bigger is better.

All this alcohol is a concern to wine makers, academically. I chat with them in the privacy of their wineries and most agree that to make a great Zinfandel, you need moderate alcohol; high alcohol masks fruit. One wine maker at ZAP poured a delicious 1996 Zinfandel. It had 16% alcohol. “I ought to de-alcoholize part of this to bring the total alcohol down,” he confided – but he fears it might sell better at 16%. Which is confirmed a minute later when someone from the hinterlands stops by his table, sips this wine, and coos sweet nothings about it. The wine maker just shrugs his shoulders.

The high alcohol that infects so many Zinfandels these days is only part of the problem. High alcohol also generates high tannins, and this was really evident in the ZAP tasting. I heard many consumers acknowledge the excessive tannins, but many said that the wines would be fine with bottle age. Get serious: no one really likes aged Zinfandel – at least, not

Zinfandel that is old enough to have lost excessive tannins. The tannin will not dissipate before the fruit; the fruit will go first.

### The Piedmont Lesson

All red wines that contain high tannins become supple only one way: time in the bottle softens them. But unlike other red wines, Zinfandel doesn't handle the aging process as well. This became clear a few days earlier, coincidentally at another, much smaller tasting also at Fort Mason Center.

It was staged by Estate Wines, which imports a range of excellent wines from Piedmont. This includes Barolo and Barbaresco, wines that characteristically are hard as concrete when young. Had this tasting been open to the public, (a) few wine lovers would have attended, and (b) if they had, most would have declared the wines undrinkable, so hard and uninteresting are they when young.

But these wines are not made to be enjoyable now. Any wine lover who has had a grandly mature Barolo or Barbaresco will tell you age is the *only* way to get at the marvelous flavors in these wines. And by age, we're talking an absolute minimum of 10 years before these wines begin to show what fascinating flavors can be coaxed from the intransigent grape Nebbiolo.

So here we had an odd juxtaposition: on one hand, we had a wide range of expensive Piedmontese wines that were all but undrinkable being appreciated by a small coterie of wine buyers for local restaurants and retail shops (and a few members of the media); days later masses of people gurgled at the charms of a red wine that is growing ever more tannic and alcoholic, and they know these are early-drinking wines.

I tasted a number of exceptional Zinfandels at the ZAP tasting. Many consumers seemed fascinated sipping barrel samples: I chose to taste only already-bottled wine. Here are a few of the better ones, all worth ordering (phone numbers listed for wines not yet released, or in short supply):

### Tasting Notes

#### Exceptional

1995 **Deux Amis**, Sonoma County (\$15): Lovely fruit aroma of plum, raspberry jam and spice in a deep, richly fruity wine that's approachable. Tannins are here, but aren't intrusive. Phyllis Zuzunis is a brilliant wine maker, and this wine shows evidence of her graceful touch. A big yet still elegant wine. Release date: June 1. (707-431-7945)

1996 **Fife**, Old Vines, Napa Valley (\$20): Deep, black cherry and anise notes, a hint of pepper, with ripe fruit in the finish. Pretty tannic right now, but already accessible. Should be great in two years. (707-963-1534)

1995 **Buehler**, Estate Napa Valley (\$25): Clove, cinnamon and pepper mark this medium-bodied but full-flavored wine that already shows complexity from the fruit. Release date: June 1. It is, alas, quite expensive.

1996 **Kunde**, Sonoma Valley (\$16): Wonderful strawberry

and raspberry tones with traces of other elements, such as anise, pepper, sandalwood, and clove. Quite complex from the addition of 9% Grenache and Petite Sirah. A lighter weight wine that still has wonderful depth of fruit. A 1996 version (\$18), to be released in April, has more spice and violet notes, but is a tad heavier and I'm not sure better for it.

1994 **Summit Lake**, Howell Mountain, Napa Valley (\$16): Ripe plum and strawberry jam notes, hints of pepper and anise, and a structure that needs either time or aeration. Generous flavors. Heavier than some, but it softens appropriately with food. A 1995 version (\$16), already released, is slightly tighter, and has great flavors when decanted for an hour. (707-965-2488)

1995 **Mazzocco**, Sonoma County (\$16): Violet and spices dominate this wine with its raspberryish tones. Medium weight and loaded with charm, it's better value than the same winery's 1994 Cuneo & Saini Vineyards (\$20; tasting room only), with its stronger hit of oak. Made by Zuzunis.

#### Very Highly Recommended

✦ 1996 **Truchard**, Estate, Carneros (\$18): Perhaps the most graceful wine in the room, and some may have missed it. The aroma is minty-herbal, with spice and clove notes, and a texture like silk. Wonderful for immediate drinking with food.

1996 **Taft Street**, Sonoma County (\$12): Stylish fruit with little oak flavor; a lean-ish entry, and a fresh, tasty finish.

1996 **Carmenet**, Evangelho Vineyard, Contra Costa County (\$16.50): A non-traditional wine that I liked a lot, but I'm not sure others will like it as much. Pine/citrus aromas play hide-'n'-seek with lovely cherry and raspberry fruit, and a very graceful structure. Not big and bold, but tasty.

1996 **Fanucchi Old Vine**, Wood Road Vineyard, Russian River Valley (\$33.25): Thick and concentrated, in a style that's popular today; fruit notes of blackberry, violets and a trace of underbrush. A bit hard, and I have a nagging sense time might not cure the astringency. Note the price; 'nuff said.

□

In a vast tasting like this, it's not possible to make precise judgments; gut reactions drive the palate. But many wines were awfully tannic and not to the consumers' benefit.

#### Wine of the Week ♥

1991 **Storybook Mountain** Zinfandel, Napa Estate (\$17): Fans of mature Zinfandel will like this wine's stylish lean fruit, freshness and attractive mouthfeel. Still a bit tannic, but it should come around in a couple of more years, or with decanting. (707-942-5310).

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