



July, 2017



Our features this month take us to the spectacular coast of California, as we will learn how the cold Pacific Ocean, rugged valleys and fog influence the wines of this amazing area. What is truly amazing is how diverse the climate becomes simply by changing the vineyard site by a few hundred yards farther inland. If you have never been to this part of California, I urge you to go, and hopefully, this write up will give you a good picture of what to expect.

Our first wine, the **2015 Edmeades Zinfandel "Mendocino" (\$17)** is part of my ongoing desire to awaken interest in this variety, which has been fading away for a few years with consumers. The Zinfandel grape has a long history in Mendocino County, which lies directly north of Sonoma County. The earliest plantings of grape vines in the area came after the gold rush of the 1850's, as many miners shifted to farming for survival. As many of these prospectors came from Europe, they naturally had a desire for wine and found the hillsides of Mendocino reminiscent of their homeland vineyards. No one is sure when Zinfandel came to the area, but it has been planted in the region since at least the late 1800's. If the subject fascinates you, read David Darlington's book, **Angels' Visits : An Inquiry into the Mystery of Zinfandel**, which gives an opinion of how Zinfandel may have arrived in California. Keep in mind the book was published in 1991 and modern DNA evidence punches holes in a couple of his theories, but for \$4 on thriftbooks.com it is an interesting summer read. What we do know is that pre-prohibition there were hundreds of acres of vines in Mendocino county, but due to the remoteness most of the wine was consumed by local farmers. By the end of prohibition, only a few acres of vines survived, championed by the Parducci family who maintained their vineyards in the Redwood Valley.

Then in 1963 a Pasadena cardiologist named Donald Edmeades recognized the potential to grow high quality Zinfandel in an area of Mendocino county called Anderson Valley. Traveling through Anderson Valley today, with vineyards stretching as far as the eye can see, it is hard to imagine those were the first commercial plantings in the area, just 54 years ago. For Edmeades, and his son Deron, they also recognized the valley floor was too cool for Zinfandel, as the area is blanketed in fog each morning. They chose instead to plant high on the ridge lines above the fog, where their vines received enough sunlight even if the climate was relatively cool. The combination of cooler climate and ample sunlight allow Zinfandel, and now Syrah as well, to ripen slowly and fully over a very long growing season. The two eventually established a winery in 1972 and produced wine until 1988, when they were purchased by an up-and-coming vintner named Jess Jackson.

When Jackson purchased this winery, one of the family's first in a now vast empire, Zinfandel was enjoying a tide of popularity. The single vineyard wines bottled by Ravenswood, then under the direction of Joel Peterson, and Ridge Vineyards under Paul Draper, were garnering high critical praise. Eager to produce his own stable of cult wines, Jackson scouted the areas of Mendocino county looking for the same, unique expressions of site through the Zinfandel grape. Today's winemaker, Ben Salazar, produces an impressive array of single vineyard wines from the area; he gets his fruit from great sites they own as well as established, old vine vineyards from whom he contracts to buy grapes. To me the standout for value is this excellent Mendocino County bottling.

One thing you find with Zinfandel is that most winemakers use a pallet of other grapes to help build the final wine. The variety is fickle to ripen, and often does not have much color despite high sugar content. As such this wine is a blend of 86% Zinfandel, 10% Petite Sirah and 4% Syrah. The latter two are used to build a little extra color and structure into the aromatic and charming Zinfandel. Salazar prefers to let the aroma of the grape show naturally, so this wine is aged in a combination of American and French oak barrels, but only 14% of which are new.

When you pull the cork on this wine you will want to decant it for at least a half hour and even give it a light chill. Like most Zins, this one is high octane, possessing an impressive 15.5% alcohol. Despite this the nose is very subtle combination of fresh, ripe cherries and raspberries, cardamom and deep notes of caramel and graham crackers. In the mouth this wine shows a bold sense of fruit, balanced with a light dusting of tannins and moderately high acidity. This is an ideal wine to serve with rich meaty dishes, such as baby back ribs or slow braised pork shoulder. I also find Zinfandel to be at home on the table with many cheesy, pasta dishes. Drink over the next two to three years.

My second selection for July comes from the coastal region of Sonoma county, the **2013 Sebastopol Oaks Pinot Noir "Russian River" (\$25)**. Like the Anderson Valley of Mendocino county, Russian River cuts across north and central Sonoma County, eventually reaching the sea at Bodega Bay. It's path through the coastal mountain range also allows fog and cool winds to blow up the valley, creating a unique microclimate much cooler than the surrounding valleys. For almost a century, the area has been home to the Gravenstien apple, which grows best in cool climates. Then, in the 1980's winemakers recognized Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grown in cool climates display better balance than those in warmer environments. At that point they started buying up orchards, or paying farmers to tear out apple trees in favor of

grape vines. Since Gravenstein apples are notoriously fickle to grow, and grapes command a much higher price than other fruits, this was not a hard sell. Today the wines of the Russian River are seen as a benchmark for American Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and this bottling from Sebastopol Oaks will show you why.

Unlike Zinfandel, which is very versatile and will grow in many climates, Pinot Noir is much more temperamental. If the climate is too cool, it will not ripen enough and the resulting wine is thin and acidic. Planted where the conditions are too warm and the resulting wines are dull and flabby. Due to its close proximity to the cool Pacific Ocean, the climate of the Russian River is quite moderate. Fog lies in the area most days, creating a blanket of protection from early morning sun. As temperatures rise around noon the fog burns off and vines bask in the sun until it rolls back late in the evening. This process regulates ripening, allowing the grapes to increase sugar content while preserving natural acidity. This natural balance is the reason the coastal areas of California have become the primary place for Pinot Noir production in California, as they over ripen when grown farther inland.

The last component of Pinot Noir quality from the Russian River is soil. As the banks of the Russian River have shifted over several hundred thousand years, it has deposited a thick layer of sandy, rocky soil on top of a bed of clay. This layer is particularly deep as the river bends south of the town of Sebastopol, where the vineyards for this wine lie. Vines in this medium will self-regulate their yield, producing less quantity but more intensely flavored grapes. For Pinot Noir this is a must, as high crop yields can effect the color and texture of the finished wine in an adverse way.

For this wine, winemaker Joe Otos prefers to let the vineyard and grapes shine through his winemaking. For this reserve tier bottling the grapes are hand harvested and destemmed, then fermented in small bins, punching down by hand the cap of skins twice per day. Once the wine is dry it is pressed to French oak barrel, with about 20% being new each year. The wine is then aged for 14 months then bottled.

Opening this Pinot Noir, the bouquet should light up your senses as you pour it into a decanter. That's right, decant it for a few minutes and then brace yourself. When you finally pour a glass you are greeted with an intoxicating combination of creamy, sweet black cherries, red licorice, Confederate jasmine, vanilla wafers and Thai basil. On the palate it begins with an almost fat sense of fruit, quickly pulled together by a frame of creamy oak and a prickle of acidity at the finish. Drink this wine over the next two years with roasted duck, pork tenderloin or salmon.

The Best Baby Back Ribs You Will Ever Make (and work with wine)

I often find that most BBQ does not work with wine, as the vinegar and sugar content of the sauce is often too overpowering. When I am intending to serve 'que with wine, I prefer a dry rub that is low in sugar and I avoid sauce altogether. Properly seasoned meat does not need it. This recipe recommends removing the membrane on the back of the ribs, but for baby backs I find this step unnecessary.

1 rack of baby back ribs per 2 people

Dry rub- quantity per rack

4 tablespoons brown sugar

1 tablespoon kosher salt

1/4-1/2 teaspoon black pepper

1 tablespoon garlic powder

1/2 tablespoon onion powder

1 tablespoon dried oregano

1-2 tablespoons chili powder

Prepare the ribs by removing from wrap and rinsing, then pat both sides dry with a paper towel. Mix the dry rub and coat both sides. I usually put more on the meaty side but don't ignore the rib side. Wrap the ribs in some heavy duty tin foil and let them rest in the refrigerator until you are ready to cook them. I prefer to let mine rest overnight, but an hour is good enough. Preheat the oven to 250 degrees. Place the ribs wrapped securely in tin foil onto a cookie sheet (sometimes juice/fat can escape the tin foil) and place them in the oven and cook for 2 hours. After 2 hours, pull them out and open the tin foil to take a look. If you grab one of the bones in the middle of the rack you should be able to turn it and it will spin. If that is the case they are done, pull them out and let them rest for a half hour before serving. If you feel resistance then re-wrap them, and put them back in for another 1/2 hour. Pull them out again and open the tin foil completely. If you insist

on using sauce, you can also open up the foil and brush the ribs with your favorite example. Turn up the heat to 400 degrees and put them back in the oven ten to fifteen minutes to caramelize the sugars and give them a bit of crust.