



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

We are taking a break from our educational study of winemaking terms this year to focus on a grape with a fascinating history in the U.S. and internationally. It is hard to believe that in more than 20 years of features in this club, this grape has never been selected for both wines, despite numerous options available. However, the stars aligned this month, and we have two incredible examples of Zinfandel, a grape that is slowly losing appreciation among consumers.

In my opinion, the story of the Zinfandel grape is the most interesting of all varieties grown for wine production. For more than a century, its history has been steeped in mystery and speculation, with many characters contributing to its narrative. Only in the past decade has the truth been revealed through extensive research. Unfortunately, this reality comes at a time when Zinfandel has lost most of its popularity in the U.S., which is the most important market for this variety.

When I started my career in the late 1980s, Zinfandel was very popular with consumers, as Cabernet Sauvignon had not yet become the dominant red variety in Napa Valley. Zinfandel was often referred to as "America's grape." Even then, there was considerable evidence that the variety was not native to the U.S., but the wine industry was young and striving to establish legitimacy against the established European regions. The popularity of White Zinfandel also contributed to its prominence, introducing the grape to many Americans, including myself, despite displaying little varietal character. The story of White Zinfandel is intriguing in its own right, born out of a desperate attempt to save a struggling industry. Space does not allow for that story here, but it is well detailed on the Sutter Home winery website under the link "Our Roots."

In his book, *Angels' Visits: An Inquiry into the Mystery of Zinfandel (1991)*, author David Darlington explored several hypotheses about the origin of Zinfandel in America. He credited much of Zinfandel's introduction to a colorful historical figure, Count Agoston Haraszthy. Again, space does not allow for a comprehensive timeline of Haraszthy's life and his contributions to the wine industry, but the essential points are that he was a Hungarian immigrant who, in the 1860s, established Buena Vista Vineyards in Sonoma County. At that time, phylloxera was ravaging the European varieties planted in California. Consequently, the California legislature commissioned Haraszthy to travel to Europe to find alternatives. Proficient in 19 languages, Haraszthy was an excellent choice, and during his travels, he collected over 350 different varieties and 100,000 vine cuttings before returning to California. Legend has it that Zinfandel was among the varieties he collected and brought to the U.S., although the country of origin was lost due to a mix-up in labeling. For over a hundred years, this version of events was accepted until science began to elucidate a clearer picture.

According to *Wine Grapes: A Complete Guide to 1,368 Vine Varieties, Including Their Origins and Flavours (2012)*, authors Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding, and José Vouillamoz point out that Zinfandel vines were already being sold in New England nurseries as early as the 1820s, a decade before Haraszthy even immigrated to the U.S. So, where did this grape come from?

Fortunately, in 1994, Dr. Carol Meredith at the University of California at Davis began applying DNA technology to grapes, helping to debunk many origin stories based on legend rather than fact. One of the first varieties she studied was Zinfandel, determining that it is related to a group of varieties originating from the Dalmatian coast in what is now Croatia. She also confirmed that Primitivo, commonly found in Puglia, Italy, is the same variety and thus a synonym for Zinfandel. Meredith identified a connection with Plavac Mali, a moderately popular grape in Dalmatia, and encouraged collaboration with Croatian researchers Edi Maletic and Ivan Pejic. They traversed the country in a study they called Zinquest and discovered an identical DNA match with a grape called Crljenak Kastelanski. However, the story does not end there.

In 2002, in the nearby village of Svinišće, the team found a similar vine growing in the garden of an elderly woman, locally known as Pribidrag. Continuing their research in 2011, they established that the DNA matched that of a 90-year-old vine called Tribidrag. This specimen, documented as being propagated in the region since the 1500s, resided in an herbarium. According to the principle of anteriority, all of these varieties are now technically classified as Tribidrag. Since that term does not roll off the tongue easily, and I doubt many people care we will stick with the synonyms Primitivo and Zinfandel.

Fuso Primitivo Calx 2024 | \$24

It is not hard to imagine how Primitivo ended up in Puglia, Italy, which is the heel of the boot of the country. It is only a short boat ride across the Adriatic from the Dalmatian coast, which means that it has probably been propagated in the region since Alexander the Great wore short pants. We do know that in 1799, Francesco Filippo Indelicati, a priest and amateur botanist in the region of Gioia del Colle, noted that the variety was early to ripen. He called the wine primitivus, Latin for "first to ripen." History points to many examples of this grape growing across Italy, particularly in the south, with the name Primitivo first appearing in 1860.

In 1967, Austin Goheen, a USDA plant pathologist, visited the town of Bari in the Puglia region and was given a glass of Primitivo. He noted that it reminded him of Zinfandel and asked to see the vineyard. Recognizing that the old, head-pruned vines bore a striking resemblance to Zinfandel, he took cuttings and sent them to UC Davis. In 1972, they confirmed, using the technology of the day, that it was, in fact, identical to Zinfandel. By the late 1970s, producers in Puglia began shipping wine to the U.S. labeled as Zinfandel, much to the ire of California producers who still felt it was an indigenous variety. There were even some producers who promoted the idea that the Italian vines were actually carried from California and were American in origin. To this day, this issue has never been resolved, even though the TTB allows for the use of the name Zinfandel on Primitivo bottles. What we find today is that many Italian producers prefer the term Primitivo, as Zinfandel is not really in fashion.

For our selection, the Fuso project is the creation of American importer Porto Vino that emphasizes low-intervention farming and winemaking. There are several Fuso bottlings, and our feature comes from a small farm in Puglia that lies on a limestone plateau where the vines grow at 1,000 feet above sea level (FAS). Calx is the Latin name for limestone, and it is an interesting contrast to our other Zinfandel feature, where the vines grow in iron-rich, volcanic soils. The vineyard for Fuso is farmed using certified organic practices. After hand harvesting, the grapes are then fermented in stainless steel tanks using wild yeast. After only seven days on the skins, the wine is racked to another tank and allowed to finish fermentation and aging. The intention is to capture all the fresh, vibrant notes of the grape without a mask of oak.

When you open this wine, we strongly recommend decanting for half an hour and cooling it to cellar temperature. The nose is an explosive combination of summer fruit, with notes of fresh cherry, blackberry, dried red plum, white pepper, dried oregano, and basil. On the palate, this wine is higher toned, with a lot of minerality intermingling with the subtle fruit component. The markers are obvious enough to call this a Zinfandel, but fans of California examples may be surprised by the freshness. Serve with Asian spiced chicken wings, shrimp in garlic sauce, or any red-sauce pizza or pasta dish.

2019 Storybook Mountain Zinfandel | \$45

There is so much to say about Storybook Mountain Vineyards that space will sadly require an enormous amount of editing. However, you should treat this wine with the utmost attention and respect, as it presents an incredible opportunity to drink a wine that is a throwback to a bygone era.

Storybook Mountain was founded by Jerry and Sigred Seps in 1976, but the history of this property goes back far longer. The original vines that were planted on this site were done so by Jacob Grimm around 1883. If that name sounds familiar, he was one half of the Brothers Grimm, authors of many beloved fairy tales. Jacob and his brother lived on the estate and ran it as a winery until the 1930s, making sacramental wine during Prohibition. The only remnant of those years is the caves they still use today, which were dug by Chinese laborers. Jacob sold the winery in 1936 to a local druggist, and by 1940, it was no longer producing wine.

When the Seps purchased the estate in 1976, they planned to make wine but had no experience. Located a few miles from Calistoga, they sought the advice of Andre Tchelistcheff on what to plant. Tchelistcheff was the longtime winemaker at BV Vineyards and a mentor to most of the first generation of Napa winemakers, including Robert Mondavi, Warren Winiarski (Stag's Leap), and Justin Meyer (Silver Oak). He advised them that, due to the exposition and soil composition, their best choice would be Zinfandel. It's important to understand that Cabernet Sauvignon was not the dominant grape variety in Napa until after the phylloxera problem of the early 1990s. With no experience, the Seps replanted the vineyard, and

Jerry, a tenured college professor of European History, began learning how to make wine. They decided to name their estate Storybook Mountain Vineyards in honor of the Grimm brothers' legacy.

Although mostly by accident, their selection of this site in the Mayacamas Mountains for a Zinfandel vineyard is perfect. Today, the family farms 43 acres of vines, 80% of which is still Zinfandel, on steep slopes with eastern exposure. They are certified organic farmers, having never used any chemical treatments on their vines. Additionally, once the vines are established, they are dry farmed, meaning no irrigation, which also results in low yields. Their vineyard is also close to the Russian River, which has a cooling influence that extends the ripening time. These factors combine to allow the Seps to produce a Zinfandel that is rich but not clunky, with good acidity and tannin structure. Few producers in California make Zinfandel like this any longer, so this wine is a real treat.

The winemaking at Storybook Mountain follows a classic style. Seps, along with his daughter Colleen, ages this wine in a combination of American and French oak. We rarely see American oak used for winemaking due to the explosion of bourbon production, but most Zinfandel specialists love it for their wines. It adds a spicy, resinous, and peppery quality to the wines that enhances the same attributes in Zinfandel. Roughly 30% of the barrels used in this cellar are new, which also enhances the oak flavor in the wines. Seps ages the wine for roughly 18 months in barrels, helping to round the tannins and soften the finished wine.

You will want to decant this wine for half an hour or longer and chill it to cellar temperature. The nose is classic Zinfandel, with an intermingling of cooked, but not jammy, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, and boysenberries. What makes Zinfandel so distinctive is its briary quality, which is hard to describe but reminds me of my youth crashing through the woods and farmland of western Pennsylvania. In contrast to Pinot Noir, this wine has impressive weight, although by Zinfandel standards, it is not a heavy example. There is a deep core of fruit that is framed by tannins and a slight prickle of acidity at the finish. Drink from 2026 to 2034 with slow-smoked brisket, pasta Bolognese, or Cajun meatloaf.

Cajun Meatloaf

Like many of you I grew up eating meatloaf, which I still love BTW, but finding this Cajun version was an epiphany. I discovered it while reading David Darlington's [**Angels' Visits: An Inquiry into the Mystery of Zinfandel**](#) in which he recommends a version of this recipe as the perfect pairing. This version, which is a bit more tame but if you want to ramp up the heat of this even more, sprinkle the raw meatloaf with additional Creole seasoning before baking.

1 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
1 1/2 cup yellow onion, finely chopped
3/4 cup celery, finely chopped
3/4 cup green bell pepper, finely chopped
1 1/2 Tbsp. Creole seasoning
1/2 tsp. black pepper
1 lb. ground chuck
8 oz. ground pork
1 cup dry breadcrumbs
3 Tbsp. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
2 large eggs
1/4 cup, plus 2 Tbsp. ketchup, divided
1 Tbsp. light brown sugar

Preheat oven to 350°F with rack in top third position. Line a 9 x 5-inch loaf pan with a double layer of aluminum foil, leaving a 3-inch overhang on long sides. Lightly coat with cooking spray, and set aside.

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add onion, and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, about 4 minutes. Add celery and bell pepper; cook, stirring often, until tender, about 4 minutes. Add Creole seasoning and pepper; cook, stirring often, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Transfer to a large bowl; spread in an even layer across bottom of bowl, and let cool for 5 minutes.

Add beef, pork, breadcrumbs, parsley, eggs, and 2 tablespoons of the ketchup to onion mixture in bowl. Gently fold together using your hands just until incorporated. Press into prepared loaf pan. Stir together sugar and remaining 1/4 cup ketchup in a small bowl; spread over meatloaf.

Bake in preheated oven until well browned and a thermometer inserted in thickest portion of meatloaf registers 165°F, 50 minutes to 1 hour. Let cool for 15 minutes. Remove meatloaf from loaf pan using foil overhang as handles, and transfer to a cutting board. Cut into 8 slices.