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CALIFORNIA ZINFANDEL HAPPILY HEDONISTIC

Stephen Brook introduces a tasting, shared with Alex Hunt MW and Andrew Jefford, which showed that California's signature grape variety, while still sometimes prone to alcoholic excess, is capable of producing fine wines of structure and seriousness, even if its greatest talent is for a simple, uninhibited, succulent fruitiness that is rarely encountered elsewhere

Zinfandel is a chameleon, capable of putting on all manner of guises: fruity dry red, Port-like, and—heaven help us—white (which is a euphemism for pink and sickly sweet). No wonder it is sometimes difficult to persuade wine drinkers to take the variety seriously. The fact that for decades it had no fixed place of origin didn't help. (Was it from Italy? Or Croatia? Or none of the above?)

Yet there are red-wine lovers, including the three tasters here, that relish Zinfandel, if not unreservedly. It may not be a noble grape, but it's capable of making truly enjoyable red wines. It remains true that its typicity is hard to pin down. As well as the aforementioned pink concoctions and sometimes impressive Port-style wines, it yields serious reds in a range of styles. Picked relatively early or grown at a high elevation, it can exhibit red-fruit characters; picked late, as many are, it displays brooding black fruits.

In areas such as Sonoma's Dry Creek or Sonoma Valley, or in Mendocino, there are pockets of very old Zinfandel vines, increasingly prized as they diminish in number, as growers are tempted to pull them out in order to replant more profitable varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon. Those ancient vineyards are not usually varietally pure. The old-timers, aware of Zinfandel's propensity for uneven ripening, judiciously planted rows of other varieties such as Carignan, Mourvèdre, or Petite Sirah. Often this resulted

CELEBRATED OLD VINEYARDS SURVIVE, AND THE CLIMATIC CONDITIONS SEEM JUST RIGHT: PLENTY OF THE WARMTH THAT ZINFANDEL REQUIRES, PLUS A RANGE OF WELL-DRAINED SOIL TYPES AND DIFFERENT ELEVATIONS

in a more complex wine, with varieties such as Carignan boosting the acidity of the field blend, while the probable role of Petite Sirah was to deepen the wine's color.

Shortly before harvest, it's not unusual to find some green berries jostling shriveled ones on a Zinfandel vine. This is the notorious uneven ripening at work. It complicates the winemaker's task, because it's not evident what the final result will be like. In practice, wineries will tolerate some divergence; a few green berries may add a little valuable acidity, while the raised few will contribute intensity and sucrosity.

However, in California, where the merest hint of greenness is normally regarded with dread by winemakers and consumers alike, the tendency is to veer toward overripeness. Moreover, as Alex Hunt MW observed, underpowered Zins can seem thin and weedy. Some

jamminess and Portiness is often regarded as part of the varietal profile, although I would dispute this. Excessive sugar levels at harvest result not only in jamminess but in high alcohols. Whereas a handful of producers regularly succeed in producing Zins that hover around the 14% mark—Nalle and Rafanelli, for example—most tend to be about 15% or more. Given the natural fruitiness of good Zinfandel, such alcohol levels need not pose a problem, so long as the wine is sufficiently juicy and robust to absorb high alcohol or at least make it barely perceptible.

Unfortunately, there has long been a cult of overripe Zins, especially in regions such as Paso Robles and Amador County in the Sierra Foothills, where wines of around 17% are not unusual. This taster finds most of them undrinkable, but they have their following, especially when packaged with garish labels declaring them to be "Monster Zins" or "Cardinal Zins."

Enjoyment across a range of styles

It's widely acknowledged that the sweet spot for Zinfandel is Dry Creek Valley. A number of celebrated old vineyards such as Teldeschi survive, and the climatic conditions seem just right: plenty of the warmth that Zinfandel requires to ripen, plus a range of well-drained soil types and different elevations that allow for different expressions of the grape. There is a handful of old Zin vineyards in Russian River Valley, which is better known for

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. But the eastern edges of the appellation, well away from the coastal ranges, can be warm. Nonetheless, even these sites are cooler than most of those in Dry Creek, and the consequence is that the vines need more time to ripen and thus attain higher sugars (and alcohols) than most of their Dry Creek counterparts. There are also some good Zinfandel sites in Mendocino, and plenty in Paso Robles, which certainly has the warmth that's needed. The very oldest vines are in Amador County, but the wines can show a certain rusticity. That's probably more the result of inexpert winemaking, since there is a handful of magnificent Zins from the Sierra Foothills.

The tasters' overall responses confirm that there is no single Zinfandel benchmark and that a range of styles is permissible, indeed welcome. Alex Hunt and Andrew Jefford surely express a widely held view, which I share, when they relish in particular an overtly fruity and exuberant style. However, Hunt's surprise at finding much to enjoy in more structured and serious wines, especially from Dry Creek, reflects a growing sophistication among Zin producers. They haven't needed to set off rigorously in pursuit of balance to understand that harmony is a desirable attribute even in a wine that is the enological equivalent of a rock band. It's a hard trick to pull off, given the pitfalls to which the variety is prone, but an ever growing number of winemakers is now succeeding more often than not.

TODAY THERE ARE MANY WINEMAKERS WHO SEEK, OFTEN WITH SUCCESS, TO PRODUCE WINES THAT HAVE DENSITY AND COMPLEXITY WITHOUT SACRIFICING THE HEDONISTIC ASPECT OF THE VARIETY

One could cite Ridge as a pioneer of this style, but today there are many other winemakers who seek, often with success, to produce wines that have density and complexity without sacrificing the hedonistic aspect of the variety. Andrew Jefford questions whether even the better wines can acquire much in the way of density, weight, or complexity. That he is almost certainly right should not, as he insists, detract from our admiration of a well-made, utterly pleasurable Zin. That it may not scale the greatest heights need not be cause for disappointment, given its hedonistic character. Ambition for its own sake—whether in terms of extraction or excessive new oak or extreme concentration—is not always a virtue. A well-made Zinfandel, across a range of styles, is a delectable wine that doesn't demand respect. All it calls for is a capacity to provide huge enjoyment.

STEPHEN BROOK'S TOP WINES

- St Francis Old Vines Zinfandel Sonoma County 2015 **94**
- Hartford Old Vine Zinfandel Highwire Vineyard Russian River Valley 2015 **93**
- Dry Creek Vineyard Old Vine Zinfandel Sonoma County 2014 **92**
- Ravenswood Teldeschi Zinfandel Single Vineyard Dry Creek Valley 2014 **92**
- Easton Zinfandel Amador County 2014 **92**
- Sobon Estate Zinfandel Rocky Top Amador County 2014 **92**
- Edmeades Mendocino County Zinfandel 2013 **92**
- Limerick Lane Zinfandel Russian River Valley Sonoma County 2015 **92**
- Hartford Old Vine Zinfandel Russian River Valley 2016 **91**
- Williams Selyem Papera Vineyard Zinfandel 2014 **91**
- Ridge Vineyards Lytton Springs Dry Creek Valley Sonoma County 2015 **91**
- Grgich Hills Estate Zinfandel Estate Grown Napa Valley 2012 **91**
- Radio-Coteau Lemorel Sonoma Coast Zinfandel Sonoma County 2013 **91**
- Shenandoah Vineyards Amador County Zinfandel 2015 **90**
- Frog's Leap Zinfandel Napa Valley 2015 **90**
- Rancho Zabaco Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Sonoma County 2014 **90**

AVERAGE AND RANGE OF SCORES

	Average	Range
Tasting	87	70-93
SB	90	70-92
AH	87	83-94
AJ	85	76-93

Dry Creek Vineyard Old Vine Zinfandel Sonoma County 2014 | 92
(14.5% ABV)

SB | Opulent black-fruits nose, super-ripe but without jamminess. Rich and broad, fleshy and weighty, with firm tannins to give structure. A complex wine, with heft and spice and admirable concentration. There's an earthiness that is decidedly appealing—and welcome after the airy flightiness of the 2015s. The finish is solid without being clumsy or tough, and there is good length as well. | 92

AH | The initial aroma of classy, spicy oak gives way to some rather grand, understated blackberry/blueberry fruit. On the palate, although there's no confusing the fruit style, there is a structure and mineral dryness that recalls limestone-influenced red Burgundy in a warm vintage. This is very moreish, dynamic wine that still gives flashes of exuberant plummy Zin fruit on the finish. Intriguing. | 93

AJ | Saturated dense black-red; one of the deepest-colored wines in the tasting. Dense, meaty, promising aromas, though this 2014 wine probably needs longer to get into its aromatic stride. Very attractive already: red and black fruits, forest resins, classy vanilla, and in poised, fresh style, without any dried-fruit notes. On the palate, too, this is a genuinely impressive and commanding Zin, with freshness and true concentration born of density of fruit rather than a heavy hand on the acid tiller. There is some texture to help the wine cling to the tongue, and its oak is absorbed by the fruit and lends the fruit a secondary wealth in turn. Exuberant (as Zin must be) but classy, too, and a Zin to serve at table rather than swig on the sofa. | 92

Ravenswood Teldeschi Zinfandel Single Vineyard Dry Creek Valley 2014 | 91
(15.1 ABV)

SB | Very deep red. Dense but sweet damson and black-cherry aromas, with a dash of oak. Rich and broad, this has flesh and weight, as well as admirable concentration. There are hefty tannins, to be sure, but they are balanced by fine intensity of fruit, and the acidity gives a lingering mintiness and flair. This has length and will go the distance, though it can be approached with pleasure now. Long, chewy finish. | 92

AH | There's a thrilling tarry depth to the typical blackberry fruit aromas of this wine. The palate has a thick, unfiltered feel, and there is an oxidative touch that actually quite suits this robust, traditional style. The acid is just a little disjointed and blaring, unaware of the rise and fall of flavor in the mouth. But there is still already plenty to admire, and harmony may improve over the next few years. | 90

AJ | Dark, dense black-red; another very deeply colored wine against its peers. Perfumed, lifted, floating red and black fruits and fine moist split vanilla pods; this wine doesn't reach any notes that its peers miss, but the familiar allusions sing out with assurance, style, and warmth of timbre. On the palate, this is a wine of density and authority. All the black-fruit and bulging berry

charm is there, and all that late-summer warmth, too, but there is a concentration, a substance, a density to that warm berry fruit that lifts it above its peers. Some tobacco complexity takes it beyond the merely fruity; delicate textures, too; and vivid but ripe acidity helps lift the fruit. Beautifully done. | 92



Hartford Old Vine Zinfandel Highwire Vineyard Russian River Valley 2015 | 91
(15.7% ABV)

SB | Opaque red. Dense and oaky on the nose, with vibrant plum and black-cherry fruit. Rich, fleshy, and creamy, this is up front and intense, stamping its presence on the palate. The tannins are present but dominated by the spicy black fruits. Tremendous energy here, with the impetuosity of youth. But also delicious and irresistible. Long. | 93

AH | Deep, plush, juicy plum-jam nose, with some tarry complexity. Very full-bodied but with supple tannin just dusting the succulent jammy fruit, this is a classic Zinfandel structure, and full of appeal. It's probably quite high in alcohol, but that certainly isn't apparent with all the flavor that's present. | 91

AJ | Saturated dark black-red. Harmonious and softly fruity, with carefully crafted cherry and blackberry, and a big swirl of cream to give it corporeal allure: an excellent aromatic profile. Concentrated, deep, exuberant, explosive berry fruits of magnificent purity and depth. There is a tickle of tannin, but most of the balancing work is

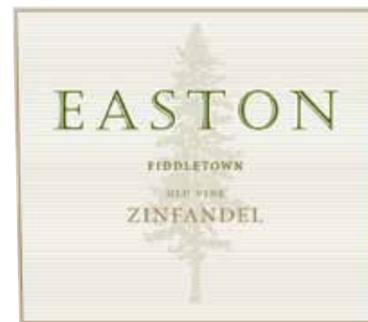
done by deliciously juicy acids; any oak is well out of view. Super-exciting young Zin, and well worth seeking out for a full-throttle VR mouthful. | 90

Easton Zinfandel Old Vine Fiddletown Rinaldi Vineyard 2011 | 90
(14.5% ABV)

SB | Deep red with no sign of evolution. Sweet, intense, cherry-pie nose, with a dash of mint. Lean and zesty, still fresh and nimble, though the tannins are still very present and intense, with some mocha tones, too. It's a tad severe and dry on the finish, which is at odds with the wine's sucrosity. Interesting and characterful, yet not harmonious. Quite long. | 89

AH | Quite mature, leathery, slightly volatile nose; appealing in an old-Châteauneuf sort of way. The palate follows suit, although with brighter acidity than you might expect. It's concentrated, thick, full, and savory, with a certain chewiness, meaty and satisfying. While I am surprised by this degree of development at only six years old, there feels nothing rushed or disjointed here. It's a super-full-bodied wine that really works. | 93

AJ | Dark black-red; just opaque still. Sweet, composty, earthy; a fine aromatic profile in which the red and black berry fruits are now in retreat, while the forest whispers and ethereal vanillins are beginning to take over the relay. To be confirmed as I taste, but this smells as if it is just getting into its secondary stride. It's not hugely rich or full-textured on the palate, and the acidity is in the driving seat, but there is still plenty of high-quality fruit here, and the wine has an energy that commands. There are tannins, too. It's the mid-palate wealth that is slightly recessive compared to others, but this might be a function of site. Very good Zin in early maturity. Tarry notes behind the lively, athletic blackberry to finish. | 89



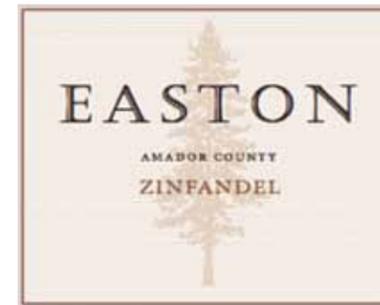
Easton Zinfandel Amador County 2014 | 90
(14.5% ABV)

SB | Dense nose, with some mocha tones, as well as ripe cherry and black fruits. The palate is rich and creamy, with good concentration, fine-grained tannins, and bracing acidity. It may not be profound, but the surface here is packed with action. In its own terms, very successful. Good length. | 92

AH | Bright, spicy, still youthful and unformed on the nose. The palate is tingling with potential; there is real concentration of classic varietal plum fruit, and plenty of tannic muscle too, yet no sense

of heaviness or excess. Alcohol does make a brief appearance toward the finish, but not really to the detriment of the overall balance; the fruit is juicy enough to justify it. | 93

AJ | Dark but translucent black-red. Sweet, soupy, warmly raisiny scents; a little cigar-leaf complexity. Gently attractive. On the palate, it just tumbles over the ripeness threshold into a soft jamminess, though it has fair concentration and a little textural depth. Enjoyable and mellow now, and jamminess might be relished by some Zin drinkers. | 85

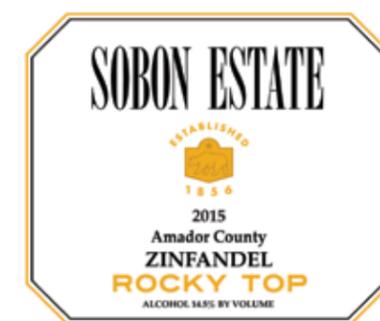


Sobon Estate Zinfandel Rocky Top Amador County 2014 | 89
(14.5% ABV; SC)

SB | Lean, intense, red-fruits nose; it's reticent but full of charm, and given complexity with a light vanilla tone. Medium-bodied but concentrated, with a robust tannic backbone and firm acidity. The has spice and pep and lift, and even if it lacks some depth and weight, it has elegance and persistence. There's more sophistication here than in most of these Zins, and the structure and texture are most appealing. | 92

AH | A paler style, with the appealing brightness and spice of whole-cluster fermentation. The palate is both juicy and deft, with a sense of tactile grip rather than obvious tannin per se. Acid is neatly balanced, the finish is long—even with a touch of raisin at the end, this is refreshing and detailed. | 91

AJ | Light and translucent against most of its peers. Sweet, vapory scents like the plum-scented or vanilla-scented Dutch pipe tobaccos of my youth; a touch of raisin here, too, but it's all attractive in a mellow, kick-back, rocking-chair kind of way. That's the style note for the palate, too; more of a drinker's Zin than a wine geek's Zin, but I would certainly enjoy a glass or two of this sweet, open-pored, mellow red wine. | 85



ALEX HUNT MW'S VERDICT

Even if Zinfandel can be regarded as a chameleon variety to an extent, I have hitherto always tended to favor one particular style. When it hits the fresh-ripe bull's-eye—plum-jam-scented but not jammy, sweet with fruit but not sugary, silky but structured—Zin offers a singular delight that resembles no other wine. This is the style that the likes of Hartford and Ravenswood have delivered consistently for years, and they gave fine accounts in this tasting.

I was pleasantly surprised, however, to find so many good wines that didn't fit this particular paradigm. We saw wines with extra gravitas and grip, particularly from Dry Creek, while others offered the super-modern combination of pale color and a suggestion of stems, harnessing the variety's natural juiciness to complement the light extractive touch. There were, variously, echoes of Grenache, Syrah, and Pinot Noir in some of these examples, yet most of them retained an individual identity.

Less successful were those wines that strayed in the direction of Cabernet, either herbaceous or tight and introvert. These are traits that sit ill with Zin. Likewise, while it has a bit of leeway for either oxidation or reduction, and indeed an affinity with oak, some wines went too far. When a variety has such winning natural fruit, the last thing it should endure is bruised-apple or gravy-like oxidation, or the whiff of drains, or an impenetrable smear of caramel oak.

A final note on alcohol: There was a tremendous range among the best wines, from 12.8% to 15.7%. This goes to show once again that alcohol itself is neither a good nor a bad thing, aesthetically at least, provided it is part of a balanced whole and marries well with the nature of the fruit. Zin can arguably succeed at higher alcohol levels than any other variety (*appassimento* styles excepted), but I have often found low-alcohol styles rather insubstantial and anonymous. Not so today. A chameleon indeed.

TOP WINES

Dry Creek Vineyard Old Vine Zinfandel Sonoma County 2014 93	Ravenswood Teldeschi Zinfandel Single Vineyard Dry Creek Valley 2014 90
Easton Zinfandel Old Vine Fiddletown Rinaldi Vineyard 2011 93	Broc Sonoma County Zinfandel 2014 90
Easton Zinfandel Amador County 2014 93	Frog's Leap Zinfandel Napa Valley 2015 89
Seghesio Cortina Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Sonoma County 2014 92	Sebastiani Zinfandel Sonoma 2014 89
Hartford Old Vine Zinfandel Highwire Vineyard Russian River Valley 2015 91	Limerick Lane Zinfandel Russian River Valley Sonoma County 2015 88
Sobon Estate Zinfandel Rocky Top Amador County 2014 91	Turley Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Fredericks Vineyard 2014 88
Brazin Old Vine Zin Lodi 2014 91	Ridge Vineyards Geyserville Alexander Valley Sonoma County 2015 88
Shenandoah Vineyards Amador County Zinfandel 2015 91	Joseph Swan Vineyards Zinfandel Mancini Ranch Russian River Valley Sonoma County 2012 88

Hartford Old Vine Zinfandel Russian River Valley 2016 | 89
(15.5% ABV)

SB | There's a burst of primary fruit on the nose, as though fresh from the press. It's juicy and plummy, dense and vibrant, with delightful exuberance. The palate is plump, rounded, and spicy, with some pepper as well as fruit. Despite the softness of the attack, it has texture and grip. Gawky and adolescent, it is lively and perky and should be delicious in a year's time. Good length. | 91

AH | Youthful, inky-fruity nose, already with some plum-jam Zinfandel identity. The palate is densely tannic at present; the impression is hence more the skin than the pulp of the fruit. It's worth waiting a couple of years for this to soften, since the finish is gentler than the mid-palate. | 87

AJ | Saturated deep black-red. Excitingly fresh, vivacious, black-berry and black-cherry scents, then a bright cascade of those two fruits on the palate. It's almost the red equivalent of a Mosel Riesling, in that one might actually be drinking the pressed fruit juices themselves, rather than

the wine that is vinified from them. Sweet, fresh, vibrant, and lip-smacking; huge fun. A little tar to finish. Okay, it's young, but there is admirable purity here. | 90

Edmeades Mendocino County Zinfandel 2013 | 89
(15% ABV)

SB | Brooding cherry nose, still surprisingly reserved for 2013. The attack is rich and dense, with imposing breadth of very ripe cherry fruit dusted with Indian spice. Assertive rather than elegant, but very concentrated and tense, with a hint of oak. This is still youthful, with a good deal of structure. Old-school Zinfandel, but without excesses such as very high alcohol. This has character and length. | 92

AH | Somewhat oxidative on the nose, with notes of gravy and dried apple. The slightly bitter palate confirms—there just isn't enough fruit or freshness here to express the variety or go the distance. | 82

AJ | Deep black-red but translucent. Sweet,

creamy, mellow scents: very sensual, beguiling, and attractive. Some secondary tobacco-y complexities here, too. Finely crafted and compelling aromas. On the palate, this is a deliciously luxurious, amply ripened, and presumably low-yielding, probably old-vine Zin from a good site that has had the half-decade it needs to get away from that very simple (though exciting) youth they all have and settle down into a more relaxed and more complex middle age. Buy with assurance for ample classicism. | 93

Brazin Old Vine Zin Lodi 2014 | 88
(14.5% ABV)

SB | Plump blackberry and raspberry-coulis aromas on the nose. Rich and creamy, with a seductive texture and good intensity of fruit. The concentrated fruit is balanced by fine acidity, which lifts the palate and keeps it fresh. It's slightly one-dimensional, and the sucrosity is rather obtrusive, but overall it's appealing and accessible. | 89

AH | Dense yet very aromatic, flirting with a tiny bit of reduction, this wine has something of the northern Rhône about it, all smoky black fruit and bacon fat. The acid is marked, yet congruent with the brisk, almost sappy flavors. As a Zinfandel, it would be hard to identify. As a wine, there is complexity, energy, and balance, so a great deal to enjoy. | 91

AJ | Deep red-black though translucent, not opaque. Quite an evolved aroma, with something almost claretty about the bramble, the black cherry, and the plum; tar and chocolate, too, and an earthiness. Lots to enjoy, though not necessarily hugely classy, and the aromas don't suggest a Zin for long-term cellaring, either. On the palate, this seems like a well-made commercial wine, with ample fruited depths, some acid lift, and medium-length; no textural depths at all, however. But a very well-made, on-the-button Zin. | 85

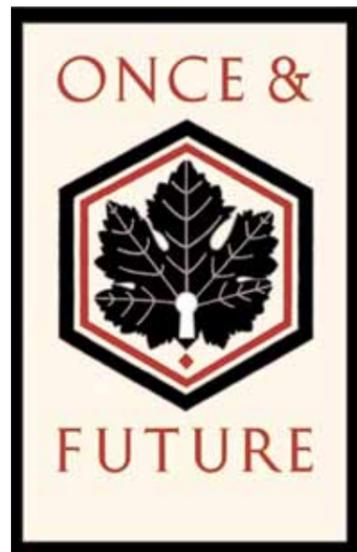
Once & Future Teldeschi Vineyard Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel Frank's Block Sonoma County 2015 (15% ABV) | 88

SB | Muted nose of damsons and black cherries, brooding and reserved, with a hint of oak. Medium-bodied and very fresh, limpid, with decent concentration and good acidity. Perhaps it's a touch simple and one-dimensional, but it's up front and enjoyable. Balanced and quite long on the finish. | 89

AH | A deep purple color and super-ripe sweet dark fruit plus alcoholic warmth give a blackberry-gin impression on the nose. The palate is straightforward but nicely balanced, with some freshness and tannic support for the exuberant blackberry fruit. | 87

AJ | Dark, dense black-red. Classic Zin scents of exuberant, sweet berry fruit: lots of warm, bubbling blackberry, and that distinctive hot-summer-day charm that the variety and the place can deliver. This is a dense, vivacious, and concentrated wine on the palate, and the flavors are a kind of smoothie essence of crunchy

sour-sweet red and black fruits. It almost tastes as if it should be packed with vitamins. No tannic presence, by contrast, and a lively redcurrant-and-cassis acidity provides the wine's balance. High impact, but I'm not sure I could drink much of it. | 88



Shenandoah Vineyards Amador County Zinfandel 2015 (14.5% ABV) | 88

SB | Lighter in color than the other 2015s, but that's of little significance with Zinfandel. Fresh cherry-and-raspberry nose, with a hint of oak. Bright, lively attack, with a dusting of tannin behind the fruit, a limpid, refreshing style with good acidity and immediate accessibility. A pretty wine, balanced and quite long, though there's no great depth of flavor here. | 90

AH | Paler than most here, with the leafy-spicy lift of whole-cluster vinification; together with the fresh blackberry fruit, this lends the nose a northern Rhône feel. The palate is much juicier—closer to Grenache if we're continuing the Rhône analogy—with a real bramble/plum sweetness to it. It's certainly an original take on the variety, showing the light touch and natural balance of California's new wave. | 91

AJ | Deep red-black but translucent. Solid, classic, sweet plum and blackberry fruit, though without any particular lift or finesse. A little mushroomy development, too, and some oak shaping; I would have guessed a slightly older wine than 2015. On the palate, this is broad, soft, soupy, once again in that secondary style, and a relatively undemanding drink, though comfortable and easy as it slips down. There's nothing wrong with it, but we are long way from the "fine wine" ideal here. | 83

Williams Selyem Papera Vineyard Zinfandel 2014 (14.8% ABV) | 88

SB | Very deep ruby, still bright and youthful. The nose displays sumptuous black-cherry fruit, decidedly in your face, but certainly acceptable

for Zinfandel. Rich and super-ripe on the palate, this has a slight sweetness that probably derives from alcohol rather than residual sugar. Flirting dangerously on the edge of overripeness, this has a redeeming intensity and acidity to keep it from being cloying, and there are some welcome red fruits on the finish. Long. | 91

AH | Quite closed, still very much Zin-like in its plummy fruit, though at the pruney end of the spectrum. The palate is well balanced in itself, with no one element sticking out, but it feels too thick, rather muscle-bound, and could get fatiguing after a glass. | 85

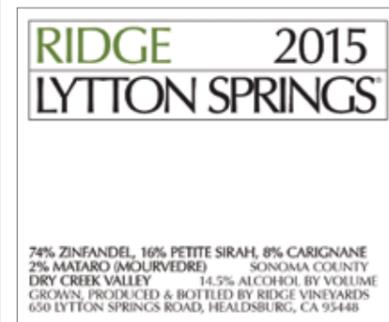
AJ | Dark black-red, and just into opacity. Beef stock and black berry—perhaps just a little reduction here, but not enough to vitiate what is an exciting and attractive aromatic profile. Earth, clay, and grunt. Deep, concentrated, and vivacious on the palate, and without perhaps quite the level of density the palate suggested; some nascent mushroomy complexities. There is juicy, almost pippy, acidity (raspberry, strawberry—some red-fruit lift for the black-fruit sugars). It's an "all-about-the-fruit" Zinfandel, attractive, vivacious, head-turning, and one to gulp and swallow rather than sip and spit. | 88

Ridge Vineyards Lytton Springs Dry Creek Valley Sonoma County Bottled January 2017 2015 (14.5% ABV) | 88

SB | Lively plum-and-sour-cherry nose, ripe but zesty. Good attack, with a silky texture, good concentration, and elegant tannins. A model of restraint, yet it doesn't lack flavor or even some intensity. The light but discernible structure does give some staying power and a moderate aging potential. | 91

AH | This nose is pretty close to generic warm-climate red wine, with only a hint of more specific plummy Zinfandel character. It's light, short, and simple in the mouth. Technically correct, basic wine. | 83

AJ | Dark but clear red-purple. Very attractive, exuberant raspberry, vanilla, and sweet-spice scents. On the palate, this is a juicy and exuberant wine, too, and better balanced than many of its 2015 peers, with less insistent acidity and a bit more textural wealth. We almost get beyond the fruit to a sense of meatiness here. There is ample sweetness of fruit, but it's not cloying. The palate fruits are more plum and blackberry rather than raspberry. A very good effort, and a fine introduction to the variety. | 89



74% ZINFANDEL, 16% PETITE SIRAH, 8% CARIGNANE
2% MATARO (MOURVEDRE) SONOMA COUNTY
DRY CREEK VALLEY 14.5% ALCOHOL BY VOLUME
GROWN, PRODUCED & BOTTLED BY RIDGE VINEYARDS
650 LYTTON SPRINGS ROAD, HEALDSBURG, CA 95448

ANDREW JEFFORD'S VERDICT

This was a hugely enjoyable tasting. I don't think there is really a better beginner's red-wine variety/place combination than California Zinfandel—and I don't mean any disparagement by this. That exuberant, perfectly intelligible, and succulently defined berry fruit combined with its innate sweetness, often a juicy acid balance, and very little detaining tannin is just perfect for newcomers to wine, who often find "classic" reds both acidulous and overgrippy. Those juicy, sweet-fruited qualities were amply on display in this tasting. The big challenge is to define them perfectly, suggesting the fruit itself, without overfreighting them with oaky vanilla sweetness, and this was something that the top-scoring wines on my sheet did admirably (but the less impressive wines failed to do).

After that comes the question: Are these fine wines? By which we must

mean something like complex red wines of gastronomic aptitude, with layered, harmonious flavors and the ability to modulate and change for the better with age. I'm not sure about this. The best of the older wines did show an ability to change and modulate with age, for the better; the seductive berry fruit of youth settles down into something more mushroomy, more tobaccoey, but remains as inviting as ever it was: the wise smiling old grandpappy wine on the verandah rocking chair. But gastronomic aptitude? Here I think the inability of Zin to muster much textural density, extractive weight, or tannic interest holds it back somewhat—and, it should be said, its weight of sweetness (as palpable in age as in youth) likewise. That was why my scores topped out at 93. But... the best wines are hugely enjoyable, and no one who wants to understand what the wine world has to offer should neglect them.

TOP WINES

- Edmeades Mendocino County Zinfandel 2013 93
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Limerick Lane Zinfandel Russian River Valley Sonoma County 2015 (14.8% ABV) | 88

SB | Sweet raspberry-and-blackberry nose, showing both density and charm. Rich, ripe, and very concentrated, this has firm tannins behind the fruit and somewhat raucous acidity. There's a *sauvage* character I find appealing, and this has more depth, pungency, and personality than most of the 2015s. The acidity drives the palate to a slightly sweet but not jammy finish. Quite long, and seductively textured. | 92

AH | Minty, tarry—roasted fruit but with a lift. The palate shows very marked acid given the ripeness of fruit; a softer structure would bring more harmony at this stage. But there is concentration, vigor, and length, as well as sensitively extracted tannin. One to come back to in a few years. | 88

AJ | Dark black-purple, and just into opaque. A mixture of red brambly fruits with some raisiny notes, some fig too. Touch of silage also. Very edgy, primary fruits, with ample acid lift; on the palate, indeed, there are fewer dried-fruit notes than the aromas suggested, and more crushed or puréed fresh fruit. There is some texture—the kind of powdery tannins that can come from wood or adjustments. Another broadly successful Zin in

the edgy, power-drive style, which seems to be the zeitgeist for the younger wines in the tasting. | 83

Turley Zinfandel Sonoma Valley Fredericks Vineyard 2014 (15.8% ABV) | 88

SB | Sweet juicy brambly nose, with ripe raspberry tones, too, showing zest and energy. The attack is fresh but artificially aided by a sprinkling of CO₂ in the wine. Bright and minty, but the fruit character is not conspicuous. It's a pretty and vivacious wine, showing some leg, but Zin should be cloaked in succulent ripe fruit, and this isn't. Quite long. | 87

AH | The nose of this inky-purple wine seems a little out of sorts, with a pronounced aldehyde (bruised apple skin) aroma masking some powerful brambly fruit. The palate, too, isn't joined up today; there is a disconnect between the slightly rasping tannin, brisk acidity, and gentle rich black fruit. There are a lot of good components here, so I want to believe that cellaring will be rewarded with harmony. | 88

AJ | Dark black-red and very nearly opaque. Not a powerfully aromatic wine, but intricate in a way that few Zinfandels are, with lots of fresh plummy depths, an autumnal jam-pot sweetness, and some freshly dug earth, too. Some

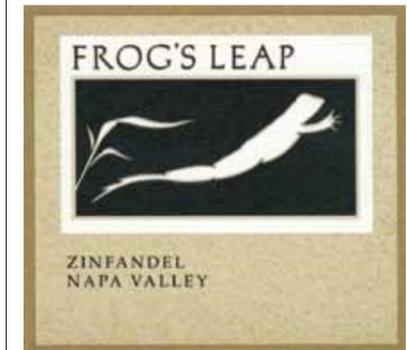
tobacco-leaf fragrance, finally. An impressive aromatic profile. Sweet and toothsome on the palate, but with some acid lift, too, and the faintest of textural presences. A little darker spice toward the finish, and a touch of dark chocolate, too. A note of warm hay after the wine has gone. Impressive within the style parameters. | 88

Frog's Leap Zinfandel Napa Valley 2015 (13.6% ABV) | 87

SB | Lush, plummy nose, with impressive depth of fruit. The attack is fresh and lively, and this has admirable clarity of fruit and brightness. Very ripe without being jammy, this is zesty and moreish, with a sleek texture and a balanced, perky finish. Not a profound wine for long cellaring, but it brings immediate pleasure. | 90

AH | Pale to middling red in color, and a very appealing, open nose of plum jam, with some alcoholic warmth and slight dried-fruit character contributing to the enveloping effect. The palate is tighter than expected, with quite firm, fine tannin lending a sort of mineral, stony quality to the texture. Elegant, a little earnest compared to the nose, and in need of a year or so to relax. | 89

AJ | Clear red-purple in color. Sweet and warm, with just a touch of the forest to it (pine and resins); some vanillins, too. Gently attractive aromas while relatively soft-focus. Smooth, vivid fruits with a slightly brighter acid balance than I was expecting, as if there was just a dash of raspberry vinegar in here. No tannin at all and very little density; the palate rides on this fruit and the bright acidity. Pleasant enough but not an ambitious wine. | 82



Seghesio Cortina Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Sonoma County 2014 (15% ABV) | 87

SB | The nose is slightly herbaceous, which is unusual for Zinfandel, but it can be a consequence of uneven ripening. More red fruits than black. The attack is lean and sprightly, though there is a silkiness that's appealing. But it lacks depth and complexity, and the finish is rather weak. Not much future here, so best drunk soon. | 86

AH | Quite reserved, sophisticated, young nose, giving little away but its potential. There's succulent fruit in here and a tannic structure just assertive enough to contain the latent power. A sense of mineral elegance pervades, too. Impressive, multilayered, ageworthy wine. | 92

BRIGHT AND FRESH, WITH MODERATE CONCENTRATION, AMPLE PERSISTENCE, AND LIVELY BUT NOT AGGRESSIVE ACIDITY. IT DOES LACK DEPTH AND COMPLEXITY, YET IT'S STYLISH AND SUPPORTED BY FINE-GRAINED TANNINS

AJ | Clear, translucent red-black. Earthy, slightly grubby scents; some road tar on a hot day; something slightly plastic, too; not quite enticing, though plenty of aromatic wealth. A soft-textured, slightly rough-and-ready compilation of Zin keys: the broad-beamed brambly wealth of flavor, the lack of palpable tannin, the modest juicy acidity, and the fine vanilla mist. The aromatic failings (minor) are not evident on the palate so are largely excusable, but this still doesn't really get much beyond the "simple and straightforward" category, though its acid balance may pass for concentration at first glance; not really sustained by fruit density under scrutiny, however. | **83**



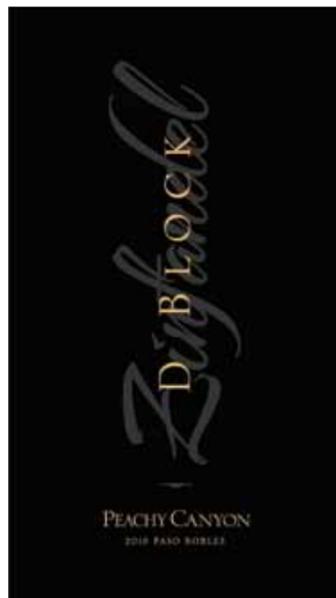
Peachy Canyon Zinfandel D Block Paso Robles 2015 (14.5% ABV) | **87**

SB | Reticent nose, with ripe cherry and mulberry fruit lurking in the background. Quite rich, sleek, and concentrated, and with enough tannic grip and acidity to give some structure. Not a great deal of depth here, but it's brisk and lively. Simple and up front—but also balanced and directly enjoyable. | **88**

AH | Closed and indistinct at first, this wine does go on to reveal some fresh, green notes, possibly from some whole-cluster inclusion. The palate is disjointed at this stage, with sweet fruit and high alcohol fighting against a certain bitterness and reserve. It's all rather jarring and may take a while to settle down. | **84**

AJ | Dark, dense black-red. Red berry fruits of some subtlety and complexity (cherry and pomegranate), with some oak softening and shaping; vanilla underpins the fruits. Attractive

and enticing. Strawberry, raspberry, cherry, and pomegranate cluster and crowd the palate, which has smooth textures and a lively red-cherry acidity; vanilla well away in the background. A high-energy fruity red. | **88**



Ridge Vineyards Geyserville Alexander Valley Sonoma County Bottled 2015 (14.5% February 2017; bottled February 2017) | **87**

SB | Muted cherry-and-vanilla nose but not very expressive now. Bright and fresh, with moderate concentration, ample persistence, and lively but not aggressive acidity. It does lack depth and complexity, yet it's stylish and supported by fine-grained tannins. A quaffing Zin, but of a high order. Quite long. | **89**

AH | Quite brooding, focused, reserved on the nose—Zinfandel masquerading as Cabernet. The palate is similarly rather tight and pinched, though there is a sense of juicy plum fruit waiting to emerge. I do hope it will; Zin needs exuberance to show at its best, and just now this is too introvert. | **88**

AJ | Deep, dark black-red, though not opaque. Slightly muddled and stewy, with something a little disagreeable; a slight drainsy note in here, which doesn't particularly clear with aeration, though it is minor enough to overlook. Bright, acidically lively through sweet red fruits, though other wines define these fruits more cleanly and attractively. Nonetheless, underneath this is a wine of some density and strike, with some force and length; a purer style would certainly have won a higher score. | **83**

Sebastiani Zinfandel Sonoma 2014 (14% ABV) | **87**

SB | Sweet, charming raspberry aromas on the nose, which is brisk and lifted. Medium-bodied and a bit of a lightweight, with a slack structure. There are some light tannins, but not enough to give grip and force. Certainly attractive and

polished, but not much complexity or drive. Moderate length. | **86**

AH | An intense, pretty nose in the spicy/red-fruit style. As juicy as a new-wave Grenache, with similar raspberry-peppery fruit, this Zin still reveals its true identity on the long finish, which is all plum jam. Not the densest or most complex wine of the tasting, this is all about charm, which it has in abundance. | **89**

AJ | Dark, translucent black-red. Rather coarse, raisiny scents alas: old-school. (But for some, I recognize, this may be a kind of down-home classicism and reassuringly authentic.) Sweet, plump, and generous, but artless on the palate. The acidity is low, and there is a little tannic or extractive richness, so I'd certainly enjoy drinking this; it's also perhaps a wine that might be recognized as kin by Puglians or Croatians. The secondary depths on the palate make for a better wine than the nose suggested. | **85**

Grgich Hills Estate Zinfandel Estate Grown Napa Valley 2012 (15.5% ABV) | **87**

SB | Raspberry-jam nose, though not excessively sweet. Broad, fleshy attack, with opulent red fruits, firm tannins, and good depth of flavor. There's an appealing sternness here that counters the high ripeness, so the overall impression is not conflicted, though it does lack some acidity. Powerful, gutsy, and chewy on the finish, without being too jammy or fatiguing. | **91**

AH | This nose is still very reduced, which masks the fruit and varietal character somewhat. The palate offers really nice volume and freshness, with quietly insistent tannin. But the reduction still skews the fruit, unfortunately, making the wine hard to appreciate in full. | **84**

AJ | Dark, black-red, but translucent. Gawky, slightly reductive and unlovely aromas that don't draw you into the glass. On the palate, too, this is a slightly clumsy and awkward wine, which no longer has the charm of youth but has yet to find mature resonance. Fair concentration nonetheless, and the depth to satisfy. | **85**



St Francis Old Vines Zinfandel Sonoma County 2015 (15.4% ABV) | **86**

SB | There's density and power on the nose, which is packed with cherry and damson fruit,

and there's a gloss of sweet oak, too. Rich and voluptuous, this combines swagger with silkiness. Beautifully concentrated and spicy, this has impeccable fruitiness and depth of flavor without any excesses. Polished and long. | **94**

AH | Dusty, oxidative nose of dry biscuits. The entry has sickly chocolate-digestive oak, and then rapidly fades to a cereal flatness. | **76**

AJ | Dark, opaque black-red. (Bottle 2 for AJ alone.) Meaty, dense, promising: a big spill of black and red berries snowed in crushed root spice. Exciting, alluring aromas, though the oak (sweet vanilla like snow on the cedar branches) is much in evidence, too. Luscious, sweet, and long on the palate: a red-berry and black-berry sleigh ride. Climb on and enjoy. | **89**

Rancho Zabaco Zinfandel Dry Creek Valley Sonoma County 2014 (15% ABV) | **86**

SB | Very deep red. Brooding plummy nose with a sprinkling of Indian spice. Quite rich and svelte on the attack, with an attractive grainy texture and moderate tannins. Good concentration here, and ample vigor and verve. Lively and minty on the finish, but the ripe black and red fruits shine through. | **90**

AH | The rather dulled color matches a low-energy nose, showing traces of oxidation already. There's more vigor on the palate, thanks to a combination of fresh acidity and fruit density, but the fruit is fairly raised in style. A near miss, I feel. | **85**

AJ | Dark black-red with some opacity. Sweet, warm, fresh, and exuberantly fruity scents, almost intoxicating before you've even swallowed: rich black plum, moist vanilla, licorice root, even a hint of cola... On the palate, it is really super-sweet, surely with at least 5g/l residual sugars, and low acidity, and warm with it. But it's gentle and toothsome, too, as friendly as a well-loved dog, and would be good fun to drink. | **83**

Joseph Swan Vineyards Zinfandel Mancini Ranch Russian River Valley Sonoma County 2012 (13% ABV) | **86**

SB | Relatively light in color as well as aroma, which is red-fruited but shy. Still fresh but rather light and simple. There are some tannins in the background but little depth of flavor or flesh. This seems to have lost energy, and I suspect it would have shown better a year ago. Moderate length and a pallid finish. | **85**

AH | Discreet, attractive nose showing a bit of undergrowth evolution, as well as some juicy berry fruit. The palate is still quite brisk and structured, with fresh acidity and firm, fine tannin. All very neat and balanced, with decent length, but it feels contained, reserved; it's not really singing today. | **88**

AJ | Light, translucent black-red. Earthy, complex, secondary, and aromatically multilayered, with notes of sweet cherry, cola, tobacco, hay, and silage; not quite sublime, but diverting. On the palate, all of the above—but also an incipient thinning and loss of flesh here, with a rising tide of acidity, which suggests to me that the wine is

coming to the end of its span—or at least that it doesn't have much in reserve. | **84**

Radio-Coteau Lemorel Sonoma Coast Zinfandel Sonoma County 2013 (15% ABV) | **85**

SB | Very deep and youthful ruby. Sweet, intense, raspberry and cherry nose, with a light oakiness, too. The attack is very ripe but also very concentrated, with firm tannins and plenty of grip and energy. This is a full-throttle Zin that doesn't hold back on the alcohol, which is a bit too overt for my taste, though other palates will find it well within the boundaries of what's acceptable for the variety. The fruit soars on to a long finish, and this has flesh and grip and rude vigor. | **91**

AH | A discreetly juicy, tarry nose that hints at more to come—then a surprisingly grainy, green-bean palate. I worry that the balance here is just too tough and astringent to blossom into a harmonious, appealing Zinfandel. | **84**

AJ | Dark black-red, just into opacity. Strange, almost herbaceous scents, well away from the sweet-fruited, berryish norm—you'd say that this was either high-altitude or a completely different picking approach. Zinfandel meets Cabernet Franc. On the palate, too, this is completely what you get. I'm slightly at a loss as to how to score this, since it is dense, deep, textured, concentrated, and well made, yet either the site is too cool or the aesthetic is too austere to provide a palate like mine with much drinking pleasure. I would struggle to drink this, alas; others may disagree. | **80**

Broc Sonoma County Zinfandel 2014 (12.8% ABV) | **84**

SB | Red fruits dominate the nose, which is lifted, zesty, and shows considerable purity. The red fruits are echoed on the palate, which is surprisingly edgy and even herbaceous. This slight greenness in unexpected in 2014 but unavoidably present here. A shame, since the fruit quality is good—it just lacks full ripeness across the board. | **84**

AH | Great depth of strawberry jam and herbaceous aromas abound in this paler-style wine. It has a delicious fruity entry on the palate, though does become a little animal-funky toward the end. It's an unconventional Zinfandel in all sorts of ways, perhaps tending toward a more Pinot-like expression. But there's no doubting the drive and cohesion here. | **90**

AJ | Bright and translucent; lightly colored against its peers. Sweet, strawberry-like scents, but a little attenuated. Very attenuated on the palate, with light, stretched flavors where the fruit texture begins to break away, and there seems nothing much beneath. | **79**

Nalle Dry Creek Valley Sonoma County 2014 (13.6% ABV) | **84**

SB | Spry cherry and raspberry nose, discreet but zesty, with a light toastiness. Medium-bodied and limpid, but it lacks some concentration and weight. Ripe but simple, with a slightly green character on the mid-palate. The finish is pinched, and this lacks flesh and persistence. | **83**

RICH AND VOLUPTUOUS, THIS COMBINES SWAGGER WITH SILKINESS. THIS HAS IMPECCABLE FRUITINESS WITHOUT ANY EXCESSES

AH | This wine has a very luxurious, Napa Cab sort of nose, with creamy-vanilla oak and slick black-fruit aromas. The palate then shows more definition and a lighter touch than expected. It's all very neat, and a good drink, without the complexity or flair of the best in this tasting. Well within its comfort zone. | **86**

AJ | Translucent red-black, but still fresh-looking, with lots of glad-eyed anthocyanins. Lively and fresh in scent, too, with some floral notes among the mulberries and the blackberries. Juicy, lively, and fresh on the palate, though very simple in both conception and execution, which is perhaps a failing when set against the "fine-wine" scale. But an enjoyable drink. | **83**

Robert Biale Zinfandel Aldo's Vineyard Oak Knoll District Napa Valley 2015 (14.7% ABV) | **83**

SB | Subdued cherry nose. Fresh and sleek, this is medium-bodied and easygoing. Light tannins give some support to the fruit, which is ripe if not especially concentrated. It does lack some drive and persistence, though, and seems rather simple. Balanced and attractive but hardly memorable. | **87**

AH | Oddly evolved nose, like acacia honey. The palate, despite a certain glycerol density, is thin and reedy in flavor. Fruit is absent... | **79**

AJ | Translucent black-red. Light cherry scents, but slightly tinted in character. There is some vanilla-sweet attraction, but the fruit quality is defined less resonantly than for most of its peers. Rather slender, light and evanescent for a young Zin on the palate. A pleasant bottle now, but I wouldn't wait. | **83**

