

CAN ZIN GET ITS GROOVE BACK?

Believe it or not, this historic grape variety is on the path back to popularity.

As a native Californian, I've always wanted to like Zinfandel more. Though its roots are in the Old World—it's genetically identical to both Italy's Primitivo and Croatia's Crljenak Kaštelanski, which also goes by Pribidrag and Tribidrag—Zinfandel found popular footing in California's original wine boom.

By the early 1900s, it was grown nearly everywhere in the state, from the redwoods of Mendocino and hillsides of Paso Robles down to the flats of Rancho Cucamonga and elsewhere throughout Southern California.

As consumer tastes are shifting toward more elegant, less alcoholic wines, so is a lot of Zinfandel.

When the state's modern wine industry took off in the 1970s, Zinfandel enjoyed distinct advantages. Not only did its jammy profile attract American consumers seeking ripe flavors, but many wines came from old-vine vineyards, which provided a romantic connection to the Golden State's almost forgotten, pre-Prohibition wine history.

Ripeness was only amplified over the years, so much so that Zinfandel's most famed producer, Ravenswood, adopted the tagline "No Wimpy Wines." That brash attitude was shared by others statewide, and nowhere was the ensuing extravagance more apparent than the Zinfandel Advocates and Producers (ZAP) consortium

that formed in 1992. A San Francisco gathering of winemakers, grape growers and consumers, it became an annual bacchanalian affair where thousands came to sample tooth-staining Zins.

But as consumer tastes are shifting toward more elegant, less alcoholic wines, so is a lot of Zinfandel. I learned as much attending ZinEx earlier this year. A rebranded version of ZAP also based in San Francisco, the three-day event put education on the forefront, showing many reasons to believe Zinfandel may get its groove back, albeit by doing a slightly different dance.

First, there's a variety of styles being explored. I tasted powerful versions from Lodi, nuanced expressions from Sierra Foothills, savory styles from Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma and, perhaps most interestingly, sprightly spins from newer vines in Yolo County. Such a range only portends well for the future.

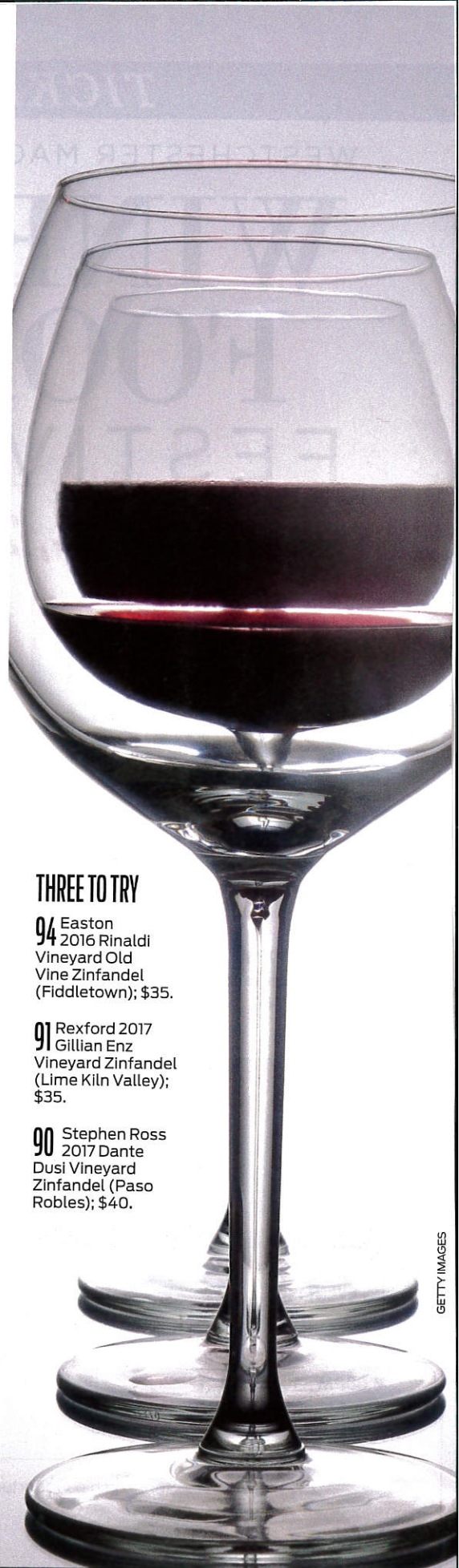
Secondly, the old-vine connection is only more fascinating today. Whether they're made ripe or lean, the old-vine wines I tasted possess truly unique California character, offering layers of herb and spice beyond the fruit. And people only seem to want to know more about the stories behind these vineyards.

And lastly, there appears to be a deeper pursuit of field blend wines. This ties deeply to Zinfandel's history, as the grape was often planted alongside Carignan, Petite Sirah and other "mixed black" varieties.

These Zin-led blends bode well for enjoyment, too. While we can't make Zinfandel what it's not, producers can employ other elements to add complexity. Indeed, that's probably why they were planted together in the first place. So let's embrace what we've got.



Contributing Editor **Matt Kettmann** grows one grapevine in his Santa Barbara backyard, a historic clone of Zinfandel from Santa Cruz Island, that made about one liter of wine in 2019.



THREE TO TRY

94 Easton 2016 Rinaldi Vineyard Old Vine Zinfandel (Fiddletown); \$35.

91 Rexford 2017 Gillian Enz Vineyard Zinfandel (Lime Kiln Valley); \$35.

90 Stephen Ross 2017 Dante Dusi Vineyard Zinfandel (Paso Robles); \$40.