

Varietal Focus:

Zinfandel

Lance Cutler

DIFFERENT WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES ARE often associated with a particular grape, and that grape somehow represents the attitude of the people. In Germany, the grape is Riesling, which is crisp, clean and rigorously classified according to sugar content. France has Burgundy/Pinot Noir: beguiling, fickle and stubborn. Argentina has Malbec, an easy-going, friendly wine that is undemanding on the bank account. America's grape has to be Zinfandel, with its brash, in-your-face fruit and sometimes over-the-top alcohol.

After years of debate, DNA fingerprinting confirms that both Zinfandel and the Italian Primitivo are clones of the same variety, most likely descended from a grape grown in Croatia on the Dalmation coast called Crljenak Kaštelanski. While Zinfandel is grown in more than a dozen states, California has made it famous. Today more than 10 percent of all California vineyards are planted to Zinfandel with annual harvests topping 400,000 tons, placing Zinfandel third behind only Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Zinfandel produces a full-bodied red wine, but it is also used to make White Zinfandel, a semi-sweet rosé. Currently White Zinfandel outsells red Zinfandel six to one in the United States.

While Zinfandel grapes will grow and thrive almost anywhere, turning those grapes into premium wine can be daunting. Zinfandel grapes are typically large with thin skins and are susceptible to mold and rot. Grapes ripen unevenly, often having ripe berries intermixed with raisins and green berries within a single huge cluster. Trying to achieve uniform ripening requires intensive vineyard labor and care, work that can be ruined by a sudden rain-storm or a three-day heat wave. Additionally, Zinfandel grapes often come to wineries both with high acid and high pH, which create a winemaker's dilemma about dealing with bacterial issues due to high pH.

Zinfandel is affected by terroir and climate. Cooler areas produce Zinfandel with more red fruit character along with spice and black pepper. Warmer areas lend Zinfandel jammy notes of blackberry and plum along with anise. Because it ripens so unevenly, one of the biggest issues with Zinfandel remains the alcohol. Waiting for green berries to ripen and then having raisins dump their sugar into must can be a lethal combination that causes alcohol to rise near 16 percent levels. Getting those wines to finish fermentation can be a winemaker's greatest challenge.



For this varietal focus, we selected three recognized but distinctively different regions: Napa Valley, Sonoma County and Rockpile in California.

We then selected three different winemakers from each of the three regions. We had the individual winemakers state their winemaking goals and give some detailed accounts of their viticultural, fermentation and aging practices. We held a series of tastings where each winemaker was able to taste all nine of the wines. Winemakers' impressions on each of the wines help readers assess how successfully individual winemakers were able to achieve their goals and which methods, in both the vineyard and at the winery, translated into the desired results.

The featured winemakers and/or owners include: **Jerry Seps** and **Colleen Williams** of **Storybook Mountain Vineyards**, **Ivo Jeramaz** of **Grgich Hills Estate**, **Jay Heminway** of **Green & Red Vineyard**, **Hugh Chappelle** of **Quivira Vineyards & Winery**, **Steve Hall** of **Robert Biale Vineyards**, **Antoine Favero** of **Mazzocco Winery**, **Clay Mauritson** of **Mauritson Wines**, **Carol Shelton** of **Carol Shelton Wines** and **Ulises Valdez** of **Valdez Family Winery**.

Napa Valley, CALIFORNIA

The Napa Valley was the first designated American Viticultural Area and is easily the most famous wine growing region in the New World. The valley is delineated by two mountain ranges: the Mayacamas on the west and north and the Vaca range on the east. The valley itself is more than 30 miles long and a few miles wide, narrowing as it goes north and splaying open into the San Pablo Bay to the south. There are 33 different soil types found in the Napa Valley with mostly sedimentary soils found to the south and more volcanic, lava and ash to the north. Many different microclimates exist in the valley, all influenced by the fog intrusion from the bay. These diverse factors make a wide assortment of grape varieties viable in Napa Valley.

Of course, Cabernet Sauvignon is king, with more than 19,000 acres planted. It tends to be planted in the prime warmer spots mid-valley. In comparison, Zinfandel is planted on a mere 1,500 acres, and most of that is located in the cooler microclimates and to the north and south of the valley. Perhaps due to being grown in cooler areas, Napa Valley Zinfandels tend more to the "Claret" style, often avoiding the highly extracted and very high alcohol styles of warmer climates, instead seeking more elegance and balance.



COURTESY GREEN & RED VINEYARD

Storybook Mountain Vineyards

2008 Napa Estate Reserve Zinfandel

(14.7% alc.) \$60

Jerry Seps, a former European history professor, fell in love with a 90-acre property north of Calistoga. In 1976, he and his wife Sigrid moved up to the ranch and started planting Zinfandel. For the past 36 years he has been one of the leading producers of Zinfandel, as well as one of the staunchest advocates for the grape. Seps is the self-described owner, tractor driver, winemaker, visionary and custodian. His daughter **Colleen Williams** has been associate winemaker for the last five years.



According to Seps:

“At Storybook Mountain Vineyards, the goal is to make a fine wine that has intense varietal character but with finesse and grace. Because Zinfandel ripens so unevenly, has thin skins and has a tendency to rot when moisture is present, it requires constant, hands-on care. We think it is the most difficult grape to grow well.

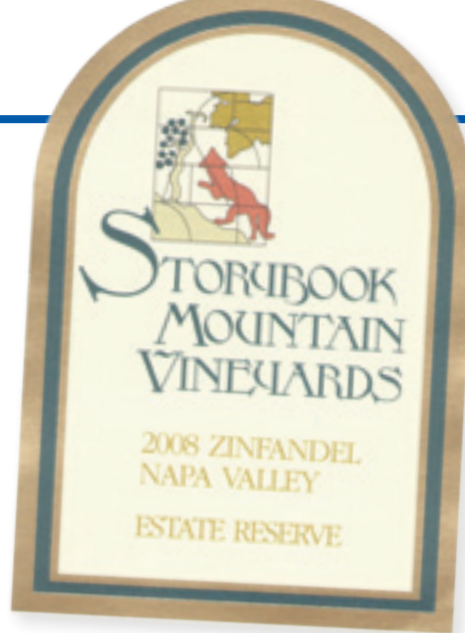
“Our vineyard is primarily east-facing with elevations between 400 and 1,200 feet. We work very hard at selecting the right clone, matching it to the correct rootstock and planting it in the right place. To that end, we have incorporated a continuous replanting of 1/2 to 2 acres per year to fine-tune the vineyard, and we’ve done that every year for the past two decades.

“We try to open our vines, as much as possible to the east, while maintaining canopy to the west to protect the fruit from sunburn. The key is to allow sunlight and air circulation into the vine and try to achieve even ripening, which is the big challenge with Zinfandel. We will drop fruit and leaves to achieve that goal. We often remove the shoulders of each bunch, and we’ll drop whole bunches if they are too close to one another. Over-ripe or under-ripe fruit is also dropped. We micro-manage our drip irrigation system almost row by row over the entire 40-acre vineyard.

“When you pick Zinfandel is crucial to the desired style. We are very subjective, looking for some pinking in the pulp from the skins and looking for at least 85 percent brown seeds. We focus on the acid/pH ratio and are usually waiting for the acid to drop before picking. Ideally, we pick our Zinfandel around .7 total acid with a pH of 3.45 to 3.50. Brix is pretty much incidental. We pick section by section in the vineyard.

“We sort grapes three times: once in the vineyard before picking, again while picking through careful selection and, finally, on a sorting table at the winery. With clean fruit, the grapes are de-stemmed in the crusher with no rollers. They go to tanks for a three-day cold soak at 55° F. Fermentation is usually carried out with native yeast, but we will inoculate with yeast if there is rot present or in the case of sluggish fermentations. Fermentation lasts around 16 days. Typically, we will delestage four times during the course of fermentation. We think the oxygen mixes better into the must this way and helps with cleaner fermentation aromas and more even temperature control.

“We press at dryness, separating the hard press. We’ll inoculate with our proprietary malolactic bacteria and carry out the malolactic fermentation in the barrel in a room heated to 67° to 68° F. The wine gets racked to barrel post ml, and we add 35 ppm SO₂. We use 60 percent American oak and 40 percent French oak. Twenty percent of the American oak is new. We tend to filter and will sterile-filter if we have issues. Once bottled, the wine will age for six months to one year in bottle before release.”



Winemakers' Tasting Notes

Seps/Williams: *There is nice red and black fruit with a complex savory component in the nose. Focused varietal flavors penetrate the palate with deep fruit and bright acidity, which leads to a long, clean finish. The oak is well integrated. The wine is intense but not heavy. It has a “weightless” quality for which we strive.*

Heminway: *Lovely aromas, just on the verge of jam, in a good way. Cherry and raspberry flavors with terrific acidity. There is a long finish, and the oak adds complexity and interest.*

Jeramaz: *I like this style. It has a bright nose and is an elegant and seductive wine. I get red and black fruit aromas. On the palate the wine is not heavy, and there is no alcohol burn. It has excellent balance. Acid brightens the finish, and there is a long-lasting complex flavor.*

Chappelle: *This has great purity and a nice mix of red and dark fruit. It is elegant and fruity without being light or delicate. There is a wonderful varietal expression with great depth. I really like it.*

Hall: *I love the aromas. I get rose petal and begonia. There is a slightly oxidized entry, and then it goes to red and black fruit on the palate. It is a beautiful wine but a bit tired.*

Favero: *I love the nose of currants and violets. There is a nice minerality in the mouth with loads of spice. Then I was looking for warmth in the finish, but it wasn't there. Great beginning but with a weak ending.*

Soto: *There is blackberry with a vanilla sweetness in the aromatics along with a floral component and some spice. It has good acidity that keeps it nice and fresh.*

Mauritson: *Nice red fruit along with an expressive richness that I really like. There is an earthy character that I like because I think it shows terroir. The wine is really well-balanced although it finishes slightly hot.*

Shelton: *I get spicy raspberry and some creamy chocolate from the oak. It has bright acidity and good structure but finishes slightly hot.*

Grgich Hills Estate

2008 Napa Valley Zinfandel (14.7% alc.) \$35

Ivo Jeramaz came to California in 1986 from his native Croatia where he had obtained a degree in engineering at the **University of Zagreb**. He went to work with his uncle, **Miljenko "Mike" Grgich**. Since then, he has performed virtually every task in both the winery and the family vineyard. As vice president of vineyards and production, he is now responsible for all day-to-day winery operations as well as being in charge of all of the organic and biodynamic farming done on the 366-acre **Grgich Hills** vineyard.



According to Jeramaz:

"We want to make Zinfandel in a more traditional, rustic style that features ripe, but not prune-y, fruit, retains good acidity and makes elegant wine. We try to keep the alcohol under 15 percent, which is hard to do.

"In Calistoga, we own 34 acres of vines, of which 22 acres are planted to Zinfandel. We have well-drained soil consisting mostly of red clay loam with a north/northeast orientation. There was a 2.8-acre vineyard of 110-year-old Zinfandel vines on the property when Mike Grgich bought it in 1996. We selected wood from that vineyard to plant the rest of our Zinfandel. The vineyard is planted in both 7x5 and 8x5 spacings.

"Zinfandel is definitely the most difficult variety to grow. In the vineyard, our primary concern is over-exposure to the sun. We want the fruit to develop in diffused light. When the grapes are about pea-sized, we drop all of the shoulders. We will also drop bunches if they are too close to one another. It is crucial that the clusters have space for air circulation; yield is not that important. If the vines stress and start to drop leaves, then we get sunburn, which we want to avoid, so a viable irrigation program is crucial.

"We don't rely on taste to determine when to pick. Too often, when Zinfandel tastes best on the vine, it is already too ripe and full of sugar. We usually pick between 25° and 27° Brix; pH will usually run 3.5 to 3.55, and our total acid will be 0.8, but usually that total acid has very high malic. We will rehydrate with H₂O, when necessary, to keep finished alcohol in line with our goals. Acid is essential for freshness, so in hot years we may add tartaric acid during fermentation.

"Grapes pass through a sorting table and then to the crusher where the rollers have been removed. We add 50 ppm SO₂ at the crusher. Since we use nothing but native yeast, fermentation usually takes three days to get started. We will 'pitch' yeast from a fermenting active tank to new ones getting started if the grapes have Botrytis or other problems.

"We ferment with a 78° F peak. We use no nutrients. We believe oxygen is critical for healthy fermentations. We pump-over with sprinklers while using venturis for additional oxygen and delestage twice during fermentation. We will also add 20 ppm SO₂ twice during the fermentation. This helps slow bacterial growth, without impeding fermentation and without adding to total SO₂ counts.

"We press at 1° to 2° Brix to help retain more fruit character. We drain the wine to 2,000-gallon, neutral French oak uprights to finish fermentation, keeping the heavy press separate. After fermentation, we'll rack off the heavy sediment and then go back to the uprights for malolactic, which usually takes anywhere from one to four months. After malolactic, we rack, add 40 ppm SO₂ and go back to the uprights. The wine will age in the uprights for 14

to 15 months until it is bottled. We bottle with no fining or filtration. The wine receives 12 to 18 months' additional bottle age before release."



Winemakers' Tasting Notes

Jeramaz: *This wine is showing more red fruit than the Storybook. We used 5 percent Petite Sirah in this vintage, so there are some nice earthy overtones. The wine is fresh on the palate with good acidity, which helps create a long lasting finish. It has good grip and should age well.*

Seps/Williams: *This has lovely fruit with some bay leaf spice. It is intense and broad on the palate, and the flavor is consistent with the nose. It is tannic but not oaky, and balanced with a great finish.*

Heminway: *I see this as being broader than the Storybook with black fruit flavor and dark cherry with a nice earthiness. There are no off-flavors. Tannin is present and provides good wine structure.*

Shelton: *This is earthy and gamey with red fruit and some minty spice. I find it soft and a bit flabby. The body doesn't support the alcohol, and it finishes a bit hot.*

Soto: *There is gamey red fruit and some slightly volatile character that shows up as strange tangerine. There are nice full tannins, but the finish is short.*

Mauritson: *This has red fruit with a gamey nose. There is some sort of green character, almost like tomato leaf. There is an undeveloped greener edge to the tannins. It has good acidity but somehow lacks intensity.*

Hall: *Youthful and less ripe than the others. An old-fashioned style with classic red fruit. The acid and tannin are still tight, but it should age well. This is careful winemaking, showing great respect for the fruit. This should be great in a couple of years.*

Chappelle: *A bit perplexing. There is a muddled nose with candied red fruit, some coffee and chocolate. It has firm tannins and acid on the attack with a lean mid-palate. I wonder if the fruit will survive the time it takes for the tannin to resolve itself.*

Favero: *This has more jam in the nose with strawberry and rhubarb flavors framed by tannin. I get some chocolate and truffle. The wine is more angular with less oak than the other two.*

Green & Red Vineyard

2009 Napa Valley Zinfandel

(14.7% alc.) \$25

Jay Heminway grew up in New York City. While in college, he spent a year in France at the **Sorbonne** and worked at **Chateau Lascombes** in Margaux. After college, he worked for **Sherry Lehmans** in New York before moving to grad school at **UC Berkeley**. He bought a house and land in Chiles Valley in 1970 and decided to plant a small vineyard in 1972. He released his first 300 cases of 1977 **Green & Red** Zinfandel in 1980. Currently, Green & Red produces 5,000 cases.



According to Heminway:

“Our goal is to preserve the freshness of the fruit and emphasize the character of the fruit and the vineyard, not the cellar. We want the wine to express vintage, soil and exposure. We try to avoid over-ripeness in our 31-acre vineyard. We want to keep the foliage intact although some drop in the basal leaves is okay. We maintain a green canopy with short irrigations, minimizing shrivel. We remove

shoulders post-veraison and any clusters that shade others. The inside rows of our trellised vineyards are head-trained while the outside rows are cordoned on a vertical trellis. This allows for even ripening and single-pass harvesting.

“We determine when to pick by testing and tasting. We’ll usually pick between 24.5° to 26° Brix, and then we’ll pick up another 1° to 2° Brix in the tank. We pick in lug boxes, which are dumped to ½-ton bins. Grapes are dumped onto a sorting table where they are hand-sorted. We de-stem only, with no rollers, and we end up with a high number of whole berries. We add 40 to 50 ppm SO₂ after de-stemming. We use a peristaltic pump to gently move the must to 4x7 open top 4-ton tanks.

“Native yeast usually starts fermenting the must after a three-day cold soak in the low 60° F range. Then we inoculate with low vigor commercial yeast. We allow the temperature to peak around 85° F, but we prefer a slow drop of about 3° Brix per day. We use oak chips in the fermenter to stabilize color. Fermentation runs seven to 10 days, and we press off between 2° and 5° Brix.

“We press lightly, never over one bar pressure, and combine press and free-run juice, sending the wine to upright tanks and flex tanks. We maintain the wine at 70° F and inoculate with malolactic, which usually finishes in two to four weeks. Then we add SO₂ and rack to barrels. We use a blend of 70 percent American and 30 percent French barrels with 20 percent new oak each year. The wine spends 14 months in oak, and we will occasionally stir lees. The wine is sterile-filtered and then receives additional bottle aging for six to nine months.”



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Winemakers' Tasting Notes

Heminway: *There are lots of blackberry aromas laced with chemise brush spices and crushed black pepper. It's broad on the palate with good acidity and a long finish. It should have aging potential.*

Seps/Williams: *There is black fruit with an intriguing floral complexity. There is less acid than the other two but enough. It's the most delicate of the three with great balance and complexity.*

Jeramaz: *It is the darkest wine of the flight. I get blackberry with licorice. It is very deep on the palate. It is supple and soft with a pleasant finish.*

Favero: *There is a raspberry nose with light red fruits, but the nose and middle fall short. There is nice acidity, but I'd like more depth and roundness on the palate.*

Hall: *This is deeply spiced with plum aromas. It is beautifully textured with elegant, supple tannins. It truly represents the site but with soft tannins. I love this wine.*

Chappelle: *This has intense spice with dark, dry fruit on the nose. It is balanced but angular on the palate. I like the structure, but it is a bit tight now. It needs more time.*

Mauritson: *This is a bit riper with muddled dark fruits in the nose. There is a soft entry and not a lot of density. There is a bit of alcohol on the finish along with a bit of acidity.*

Shelton: *There is an earthiness here along with some floral character. There is some black fruit, but it is not focused. It has a soft entry, little middle and no finish. It sort of dies.*

Soto: *This is not balanced aromatically. There is some fruit and green tea, but based on the aromatics, it should be more concentrated. The tannins are okay.*



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Sonoma County, CALIFORNIA

Sonoma County is huge and diverse. It encompasses 1 million acres, making it four times larger than Napa County. Historically, it is seen as the birthplace of northern California viticulture with grapes planted as early as 1912. Today more than 60 percent of the county's agriculture is winegrapes. There are 13 separate AVAs and more than 260 wineries. Zinfandel grows in most parts of the county. In fact, Sonoma County has 5,200 acres planted to Zinfandel, making it the state's second largest Zinfandel producer after the San Joaquin Valley.

Sonoma County has five major valleys and hundreds of microclimates. A county this large has a huge diversity of soil conditions with a large disparity between the more fertile valley floor vineyards and the better-drained mountainside vineyards. Each microclimate is heavily influenced by the fog and wind generated from the Pacific Ocean or the lack thereof.

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Quivira Vineyards & Winery

2009 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel

(14.8% alc.) \$20

Hugh Chappelle has been winemaker/wine-grower at **Quivira** since the 2010 vintage. Although he had some early experience with Zinfandel in the Sierra Foothills, his forté since 2000 has been Pinot Noir and Chardonnay while he served as winemaker for both **Flowers Vineyard & Winery** and **Lynmar Estate** in the Russian River Valley.



According to Chappelle:

“The Quivira house style is one of balance and restraint along with a purity of fruit and a true sense of place. This Dry Creek blend combines eight vineyards, all of which are biodynamically, organically or sustainably farmed. The geology is highly diverse with no one predominant soil type. Elevation of the vineyards ranges from 100 to 1,300 feet. Most of the grapes are Heritage selections along with Primitivo.

“Zinfandel ripens unevenly and needs maturity to get good flavors, so high sugars are often a side product. To control this, we pick in several passes. Recently we have gone to less leaf removal in favor of managed shade environments. We prefer shade with dappled sunlight through the canopy. Usually we clip tips and wings although that can be vintage-driven.

“For harvest, we test grapes for sugar, pH, potential alcohol, phenolics and taste. We look at flavor and skin color. For the blend, we might pick some grapes around 23° to 24° Brix to keep bright fruit character and acid. Most of the grapes will come in around 24.5° to 25.5° Brix, but we allow some grapes to hang on the vine until 26° to 28° Brix for more mature flavors. Then we’ll blend these various components later.

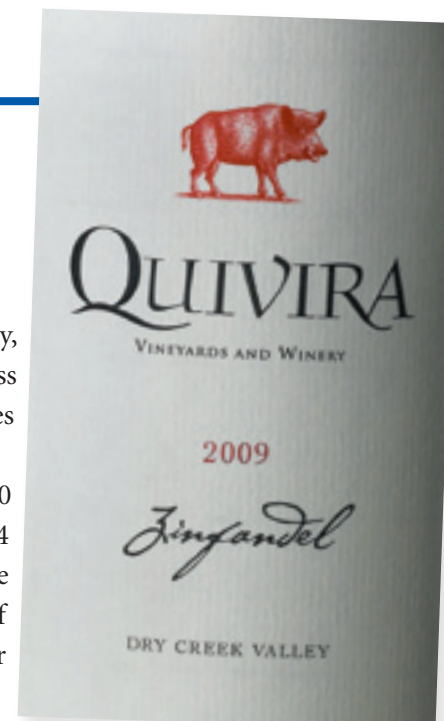
“We handle the separate lots slightly differently in the winery as well although all of the grapes are hand-picked and sorted. They receive 35 to 60 ppm SO₂ at the crusher and are de-stemmed with no crushing. We prefer to use native yeast unless we have a problem. The lower Brix grapes get a three- to seven-day cold soak and ferment at lower temperatures (around 77° F) for nine to 11 days. The bulk of our Zinfandel still gets the three- to seven-day cold soak but ferments at higher temperatures (low 80° F range) as we seek more extraction, and we’ll maintain skin contact for 14 to 18 days. The ripest grapes get the cold soak but ferment the hottest (mid 80° range) and longest for 18 to 21 days. We also do some co-fermentation of varieties to mimic old-style field blends using Petite Sirah, Syrah and Cabernet. Wine ferments in both open and closed tanks where we try to pump-over one to two tank volumes per day.

“We determine when to press based upon sensory evaluation, usually pressing somewhere between 0° and 2° Brix. A basket press is used exclusively for all Zinfandel lots. We separate the free-run and press juice and settle in tanks for two to three days. From there we go to barrels, split equally between American, French and Eastern European, using a maximum of 20 percent new oak. We also age some lots in 600- to 900-gallon French oak foudres.

“We use native malolactic in barrel, and we cross-inoculate from active to slow moving barrels. In March, if malolactic has not started in certain barrels, we will inoculate with a culture. We do our first blend post-malolactic,

sometime between March and May, usually including some of the press fraction. We rack retaining light lees and add 40 to 60 ppm SO₂.

“Aging is lot-dependent, usually 10 to 11 months, with some as long as 14 months. We usually do not fine, but we filter to yeast sterility (.65 micron) if we have 1 to 2 grams of residual sugar per liter.”



Winemakers' Tasting Notes

Chappelle: *The nose is classic briar and spice with some red fruit on the palate but mostly dark fruit in the nose. The wine is balanced with a seamless quality from entry through to the finish. It holds the alcohol well with just a bit of warmth. There is a nice layering of complex flavors. I think it can improve for another three to five years.*

Favero: *It is briary with some chocolate and good minerality on the finish. It shows good spice and acidity.*

Hall: *I like the nose. There is a deep earthy tone and some baked crabapple. The tannins are tight but tilted to the front, so it is soft and seamless. It is a well-made, beautiful blend.*

Mauritson: *High-tone red fruit, this is quintessential Dry Creek Valley. It has medium body and an elegant well-developed finish. It is a bit chalky without being overly tannic.*

Shelton: *I am getting red fruit along with black raspberry. There are nice dusty, mineral flavors along with a sweet entry. It has supple fruit flavors and well-integrated alcohol. The finish is long and supple with chewy tannins.*

Soto: *This has darker fruit and blackberry, mineral aromas. The tannins have some grip, and there is plenty of layered spice. There is a good finish with some chocolate character. This wine needs more time.*

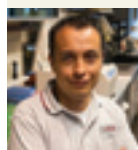
Heminway: *I get some dark black fruit, but it is very ripe. This shows forward oak with some char. There is a bit of H₂S but on the attractive side.*

Seps/Williams: *There is strong black fruit and some cola on the palate, which weighs down the wine. There is fruit, but it lacks depth and focus. The finish is the best part.*

Jeramaz: *It is a bit closed with some earthy overtones. It has lots of ripe flavor but is sort of one-dimensional. It doesn't taste hot. It's good but lacks fruit, and there is a hint of bitterness on the finish.*

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Satellite Laboratories | Healdsburg CA | McMinnville OR | Roseburg OR | Walla Walla WA**Varietal Focus: Zinfandel****Robert Biale Vineyards**
2009 Sonoma Valley Zinfandel
(15.8% alc.) \$50

Steve Hall studied as a field biologist at **UC Berkeley** before branching into viticulture and enology at **Napa Valley College** and **UC Davis**. He has been involved with wineries and winemaking for 31 years, including stints at **Stag's Leap Wine Cellars**, **Monticello Cellars**, **Clos du Val** and **Jarvis Vineyards**. He has been the wine-maker for **Robert Biale Vineyards** for four vintages and is starting to feel comfortable with his ability to express the Robert Biale style at each of their individual vineyards.

**According to Hall:**

"We try to make wines that capture our individual vineyards and interpret them with elegance, power and depth of tannin. We try to stay out of the way of the vineyard. Each year Monte Rosso has tremendous depth of fruit with well-developed tannins and an underlying natural acidity.

"Our grapes in Monte Rosso are grown in the E33 block, and there are four sub-parcels on a north/south slope. The vines grow at 1,000 feet in volcanic red soil. Two of the parcels are west-facing where they get a lot of sun but not a lot of heat, which allows them to retain minerality and acid. The 1890 Heritage vines are dry-farmed, head-trained and planted to 8x8-foot spacings. We do a wing drop and another green drop at 90 percent veraison and will cut clusters that are touching.

"Zinfandel is a confounding grape to grow, especially determining when to pick. We use pH as a key and don't spend a lot of time with TA or Brix. I like thick skins and prefer at least 90 percent phenolic maturity. Even after all of our vineyard care, the 2009 vintage had lots of green berries. I waited for them to ripen, possibly a bit too long.

"We pick to ½-ton bins, table-sort and then de-stem with a crusher using spread rollers. We end up with 50 percent whole berries. We use no SO₂ at the crusher. We ferment in very wide, 10-ton open-top tanks. Grapes are usually about 50° F in the winery. They ferment on native yeast for three days, and then we add nutrients and inoculate with commercial yeast. We use pneumatic punch-downs three times a day. Typically, fermentations ferment in the high 70's F, peaking at 79° F and then dropping to 74° or 75° F. Fermentations run 13 to 14 days, and we press at negative Brix.

"We combine free-run and press juice to start forming structure as soon as possible, but we do separate out any press fraction that shows bitterness and hard tannins. We settle in a tank for two or three days and add malolactic bacteria when the glucose is very low, usually after the wine is in barrel. We use 16 to 20 percent new oak, and all of our barrels are French Burgundy barrels although we have used a few new Hungarian oak barrels as well. Malolactic usually runs 40 to 50 days. We rack the wine, post malolactic, add 40 to 50 ppm SO₂ and then return clean to barrels. We top every two weeks. The wine rests in barrel for 12 to 14 months and is bottled with no fining or filtration."

Winemakers' Tasting Notes

Hall: This is slightly ripe for typical Monte Rosso. There is lots of black fruit, and the nose informs the mouth. It is a bit softer than normal but still has great length of tannin.

Favero: I really enjoy this wine. There is black fruit with cola in the nose. It is wonderful in the mouth with blackberry, plum jam and cassis.

Chappelle: This has gorgeous, deep, ripe fruit and a deep, rich mid-palate. It tastes like it has a bit more oak. It has a round texture and a soft, slightly short finish with persistent flavor. This is a crowd pleaser.

Jeramaz: This is high octane Zin. There is lots of jammy fruit with plenty of oak and spice on the nose. The palate is full of jammy, ripe flavors, but the wine finishes hot.

Seps/Williams: The wine is jammy, almost sugary, with a baked cherry nose. It has a rich palate but moves away from varietal character. It is very ripe and intense with high alcohol and a hot finish.

Heminway: At first I found the candied character pleasant, but with time it became overly cooked, like stewed fruit. It finishes

hot. It is done in that "big" style, and that style is achieved.

Shelton: This is big wine with dusty red fruit full of cranberry and Carmelo candy aromas. There is spicy oak and a great tannic structure and finish. The finish lingers with those cranberry flavors.

Mauritson: This has a wild berry aroma along with nice floral character and a distinctive white pepper spice. There are caramel flavors from the oak that are well integrated. There is a broad entry with good tannins that show no sharpness. This is a big wine with good aging potential. Damn good wine.

Soto: This is the best of the flight. There is dark chocolate and black fruit along with a nice baked pie character. This is rustic wine that is very extracted. I love the tannins, and they give the wine a great, long finish.



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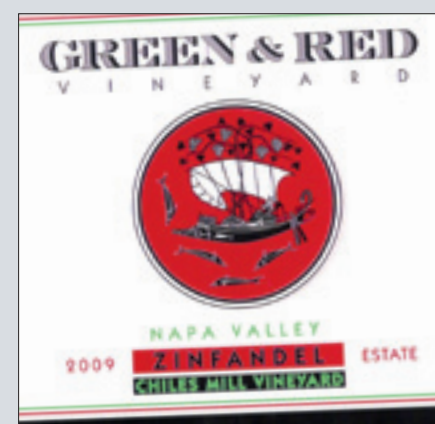
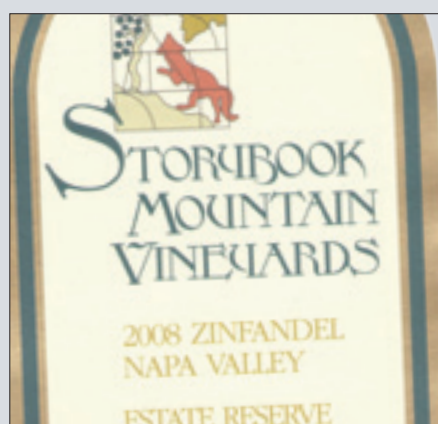
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Zinfandel

DATA SHEET

Napa Valley



Wine	2008 Napa Estate Reserve Zinfandel (14.7% alc.) \$60	2008 Napa Valley Zinfandel (14.7% alc.) \$35	2009 Napa Valley Zinfandel (14.7% alc.) \$25
Winery Vineyard	Storybook Mountain Vineyards Estate Vineyard	Grgich Hills Estate Estate Vineyard	Green & Red Vineyard Chiles Mill Vineyard
Winemaker	Jerry Seps/Colleen Williams	Mike Grgich/Ivo Jeramaz	Jay Heminway
Winemaker's Goal	Make wine with intense varietal character but with finesse and grace.	Make a more traditional rustic style that features ripe fruit, retains good acidity and makes elegant wine.	Preserve the freshness of fruit and emphasize the character of the fruit and the vineyard, not the cellar.
County, State	Napa, CA	Napa, CA	Napa, CA
AVA	Napa Valley	Calistoga/Napa Valley	Napa Valley

VINEYARD DATA

Predominant Geology (soil type)	Volcanic red clay loam	Red clay loam	Sobrante/Olympic stony clay loam
Elevation	400 to 1,200 feet	260 to 780 feet	1,000 to 1,800 feet
Vine Spacing	Various	7x5 feet, 8x5 feet	8x5 feet
Exposure	Predominantly East	North/South	North/East
Clones	1A, 03, 16,22,25, Prim 03	Heritage from 110-year-old Zin	Hambrecht old, Pagani, Geyserville
Irrigation or Dry-Farmed	Micro-managed drip irrigation	Mostly dry-farmed	Irrigated
Farming (organic, biodynamic, traditional)	Certified organic	Certified organic and biodynamic	Sustainable
Fruit Drop	Cut shoulders, space clusters	Drop shoulders, too close clusters	Remove wings, no cluster overlap

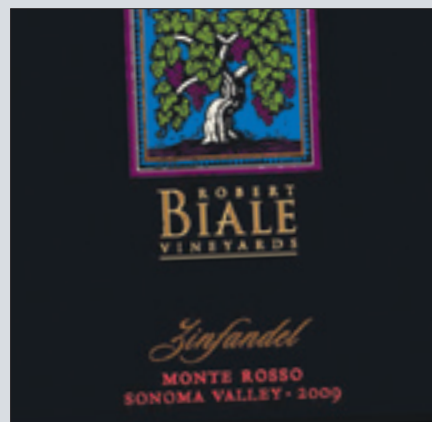
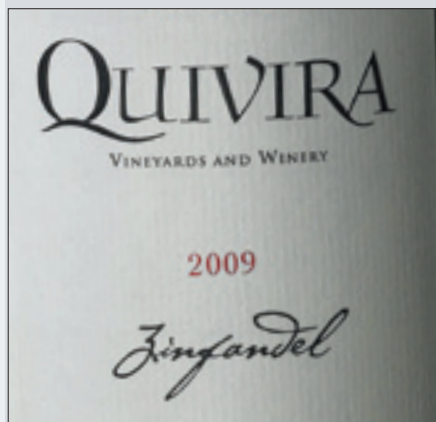
WINEMAKING DATA

Cold Soak?	3 days at 55° F	3 days 60° to 65° F	3 days at low 60s
Crush Format	Destem with no rollers	Destem with no rollers	Destem w/no rollers
Fermentation Temperature	Mid 50s to mid 80s, then low 70s	75° to 80° F	85° to 90° F
Punch-down Methods	Pump-over with irrigator, delestage	Pump-over with irrigator, delestage	punch-down
Oak Program	60% American (20% new), 40% French	2,000-gallon neutral French Oak	70% American (20% new) 30% French
Barrel Aging	14 months	12 months	14 months
Racking	As needed, prefer less and less	Twice a year	Twice
Filtration	Only sterile-filter with issues	None	Sterile, crossflow

Zinfandel

DATA SHEET

Sonoma County



Wine	2009 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (14.8% alc.) \$20	2009 Sonoma Valley Zinfandel (15.8% alc.) \$50	2009 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (16.2% alc.) \$32
Winery Vineyard	Quivira Vineyards & Winery Various Vineyards, Dry Creek Valley	Robert Biale Vineyards Monte Rosso Vineyard	Mazzocco Winery Seaton Vineyard
Winemaker Winemaker's Goal	Hugh Chappelle Focus on balance and restraint along with purity of fruit and a true sense of place.	Steve Hall Interpret individual vineyards with elegance, power and depth of tannin.	Antoine Favero Craft luscious wines that are powerful, yet elegant, long lasting in the mouth and long lived in the cellar.
County, State	Sonoma, CA	Sonoma, CA	Sonoma, CA
AVA	Dry Creek Valley	Sonoma Valley	Dry Creek Valley

VINEYARD DATA

Predominant Geology (soil type)	Mixed clay loams	Sonoma volcanic	Pleasanton/Boomer gravelly loam
Elevation	100 to 1,300 feet	1,000 feet	350 feet
Vine Spacing	8x4 feet, 7x10 feet, 8x8 feet	8x8 feet, head-trained	6x8 feet
Exposure	Variable	Western	Level and Southeastern
Clones	Heritage clones and Primitivo	120-year-old Heritage	80-year Heritage
Irrigation or Dry-Farmed	Both	Dry-farmed	Drip irrigation
Farming (organic, biodynamic, traditional)	Mixed	Traditional	Traditional
Fruit Drop	Depends on vineyard	Shoulder & green drop @ veraison	Drop to one or two clusters/shoot

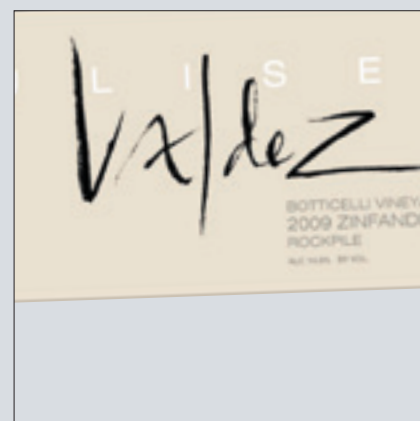
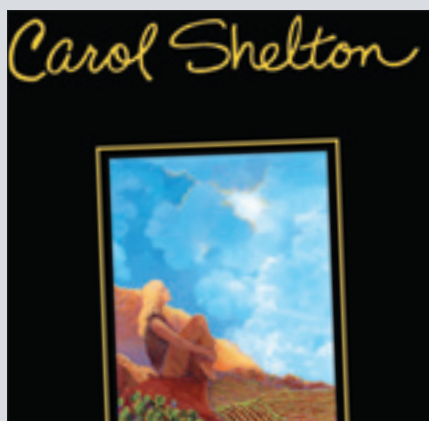
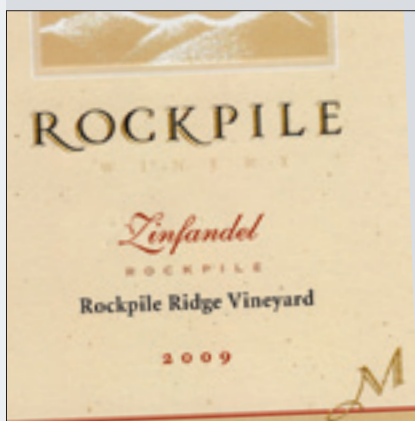
WINEMAKING DATA

Cold Soak?	3 to 7 days passive or active	3 days	One week
Crush Format	0 to 30% whole, no rollers	Destem, 50% whole berry	Destem, no rollers
Fermentation Temperature	77° to 81° F	75° F	Max 89° F
Punch-down Methods	Punch-down and pump-over	3x punch-down daily	3 pump-overs daily
Oak Program	10-20% new, French, American, European	16-20% new, all French oak	40% new, all med+ French oak
Barrel Aging	12-14 months	13-14 months	18 months
Racking	Two	Every 3 to 4 weeks	Once
Filtration	Yeast sterile, .65 micron	2 micron pad filter	Crossflow to .45 final

Zinfandel

DATA SHEET

Rockpile



Wine	2009 Rockpile Zinfandel (15.5% alc.) \$35	2007 Rockpile Rocky Reserve Zinfandel (14.8% alc.) \$33	2009 Rockpile Zinfandel (14.8% alc.) \$40
Winery Vineyard	Mauritson Wines Rockpile Ridge Vineyard	Carol Shelton Wines Florence Vineyard	Valdez Family Winery Botticelli Vineyard
Winemaker	Clay Mauritson	Carol Shelton	Mauricio Soto
Winemaker's Goal	Give the best expression of the vineyard in the bottle.	Make an elegant style with finesse that showcases terroir. Look for balance in alcohol, ripeness, fruit and oak.	Make wine that is elegant, fruit forward, round and balanced with minerality, spice and a velvety finish.
County, State	Sonoma, CA	Sonoma, CA	Sonoma, CA
AVA	Rockpile	Rockpile	Rockpile

VINEYARD DATA

Predominant Geology (soil type)	Suther soil series	Gravelly, shallow iron red dirt	Red volcanic and mixed
Elevation	950 to 1,200 feet	1,400 feet	1,400 feet
Vine Spacing	8x5 feet, 8x4 feet	terraced 8x10 feet	5x8 feet
Exposure	Northwest	60% Southeast, 40% plateau	Southeast/Northwest
Clones	St. Peter's clone/ Dr. Praft clone	St. Peter's Church clone	St. Peter's Church clone
Irrigation or Dry-Farmed	Irrigate young then dry-farm	Drip as minimally needed	Drip irrigation
Farming (organic, biodynamic, traditional)	Traditional	Traditional	Traditional
Fruit Drop	One bunch/shoot, drop shoulders	One cluster/shoot, drop shoulders	Drop fruit and shoulders

WINEMAKING DATA

Cold Soak?	3 to 5 days	Yes	5 days
Crush Format	Destem, no rollers, whole berry	Destem, no rollers, whole berry	Destem, no rollers, 20% whole berry
Fermentation Temperature	Peak 85 to 87° F	70° to 80° F	Max 85° F
Punch-down Methods	2-3x daily, alt punch-down, pump-over	Delestage then pump-over	3x punch-down daily
Oak Program	50/50 French/American, 30-40% new	50% new, French/American mix	40% new, all French
Barrel Aging	14-16 months	18-20 months	18 months
Racking	Post ml and at bottling	Prior to bottling only	Prior to bottling only
Filtration	Sterile if necessary	DE then sterile-filter	None

Mazzocco Winery

2009 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel

(16.2% alc.) \$32

Antoine Favero was born in the Champagne region of France and then moved to a small Peruvian fishing village as a small boy before settling in Northern California when he was nine. A UC Davis graduate, Favero worked for several premium wineries before taking on the role as winemaker for **Mazzocco Winery** in 2005.

According to Favero:

“My goal is to craft luscious wines that are powerful yet elegant: long-lasting in the palate and long-lived in the cellar. I want them to be big, round, jammy and powerful with a definite fruit factor.



“Seaton Vineyard is at the base of Bradford Mountain at about 350 feet elevation. The vines are 80-year-old field-selected and were planted on St. George rootstock in 1976 using 6x8-foot spacings. The soil is primarily Pleasanton gravelly loam on the alluvial fans and Boomer gravelly loam on the benches. We drop fruit to one to two clusters per shoot. We typically pull leaves until we have 55 percent bunch vision. At 95 percent veraison, we drop green fruit. The Zinfandel bunches at this vineyard don’t develop wings. We use minimal irrigation to control canopy or if we see signs of stress, so we don’t overexpose the fruit to the sun, which can cause raisining.

“Picking is determined entirely by visuals and flavor. I like brown seeds, flavorful skins and the raicus woody. I’m OK with raisins up to about 30 percent. Zinfandel always has under-ripe grapes to balance the over-ripe ones. It’s all about flavor. At Seaton, the upper bench provides more tannin while the lower flat gives more jammy character.

“We pick into ½-ton bins and hand-sort in the vineyard. These grapes came into the winery between 26° and 30° Brix. We de-stem using no rollers in the crusher and send the must to closed stainless steel fermenters. The must cold-soaks for seven days at 50° to 55° F for extraction of fruity flavors and color. Then I turn the thermostat to 89° F and let the native yeast carry out the fermentation, which usually takes about 30 days. I pump-over three times a day using a Venturi for additional aeration. I will use Superfood if necessary to finish fermentation. I combine press and free-run juice but do cut out bitter or tannic juice as determined by taste. The wine sits in tank overnight to settle and then gets racked to barrels.

“The wine undergoes native malolactic fermentation in barrel. If malolactic hasn’t started after 30 days, I will inoculate. I check my wine regularly under a microscope. That visual tells the story. It has saved my [rear] from lactobacillus and other horrors more than once. The wine ages in 100 percent French oak with 40 percent of that being new oak for about 18 months. There is one racking after the completion of malolactic. This Seaton Vineyard had 3 percent Petite Sirah blended in. The wine is cross-flow-filtered with a .45-micron final filter.”



Winemakers’ Tasting Notes

Favero: *I get some tropical notes in the nose with blueberry pie and a jammy thickness on the palate. There is even some flavor of root beer. There is a round, supple entry along with a currant and spice backbone.*

Chappelle: *This is full of complex, deep, brooding dark fruit. It is fresh, jammy and dry. The mouth is thick and viscous with noticeable warmth. It has the longest finish in the flight.*

Hall: *This is incredible Zin with lots of fruit in the nose and deep Asian spice. It is elegant with powerful tannin and a broad texture. It shows surprising fruit given its power.*

Soto: *I love the aromatics. There are provocative, complex, floral, herbal, brush aromas with some dark chocolate mocha. In the mouth the alcohol is a bit much, and there are chewy tannins, but the finish is too sweet with an almost tutti-frutti flavor.*

Mauritson: *This is ultra-ripe fruit with more chocolate than fruit on the nose. It is extremely sweet and heavy with a cloying finish. It is very concentrated but from ripeness and sweetness instead of being fruit-based.*

Shelton: *This wine shows perfumed blackberry and a rich Cadbury chocolate bar with fruit and nuts character. It is sweet, like chocolate syrup in the mouth, but it is not in balance, and there is too much alcohol.*

Jeramaz: *This is ripeness carried to a whole different level. It has sweetness on the nose and palate. All lightness is gone, and in its place is a coarseness with alcoholic heat. There is a definite residual sugar taste and a briary finish.*

Seps/Williams: *This has incredible color and is slightly aldehydic. It’s huge wine with quite a bit of residual sugar. There is no real Zinfandel character left. This is definitely not our preferred style.*

Heminway: *This wine has lost its Zinfandel identity. There are some tannins on the finish, which in combination with the very high alcohol create bitterness.*

Rockpile, CALIFORNIA

Rockpile is Sonoma County's newest AVA, established in 2002. Although Rockpile encompasses 15,400 acres above Lake Sonoma, only 160 acres are planted to grapes. The terrain is varied, but it all shares rocky, very shallow, red volcanic soils composed of loam and clay loam that provide excellent drainage. Almost all of the vineyards are located along ridges at elevations between 800 and 1,400 feet. This keeps the vineyards above the fog layer, so Rockpile is cooler than other parts of Dry Creek Valley early in the growing season and during summer days, but it is warmer at night. In fact, during the summer it is 10° to 15° F cooler than the valley. Rockpile also has wind, constantly, with breezes between 3 and five 5 up to 10 to 15 mph gusts. The shallow soils and constant wind tend to influence the vines so that berries are smaller with more tannin, minerality and intensity than other locations.



CAROL SHELTON WINES

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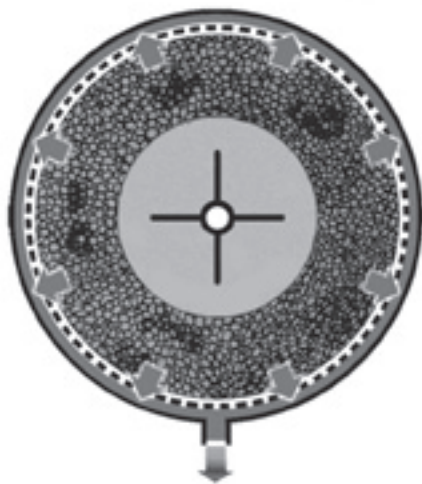
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Varietal Focus: Zinfandel

Mauritson Wines

2009 Rockpile Zinfandel

(15.5% alc.) \$35

The Mauritson family has history in Dry Creek Valley and the Rockpile AVA that dates back to 1884 when their great-great-grandfather **S.P. Hallengren** first planted vines on the Rockpile valley floor. Fifteen years ago, after working for **Kenwood Vineyards**, **Taft Street** and **Dry Creek Vineyards**, sixth generation **Clay Mauritson** talked his family into starting a winery. **Mauritson Wines** now controls 270 acres of estate vineyards, with 52 acres in the Rockpile AVA. They produce 12,000 cases annually, and half of that is Zinfandel.



According to Mauritson:

“Our goal is to achieve the best expression of the vineyard into the bottle. We control yields to maintain structure and balance. We are convinced that smaller berries produce the best quality wine. Those smaller berries give more color and tannic extraction to our wine.

“Rockpile has very diverse soil types with red volcanic and metamorphic rock predominating. There is great drainage, and all vineyards in the Rockpile AVA are located at a minimum elevation of 800 feet going up to 2,000 feet. The whole area is water-challenged, so we use irrigation to get the plants established, but the goal is to dry-farm once the vines are established.

“Our Rockpile Ridge vineyard sits between 950 to 1,200 feet and was planted in 1998 with cuttings from St. Peter’s Church Vineyard planted to 110R rootstock. We also have some Du Pratt clones. Vines are in either 8x4- or 8x5-foot configurations and trained into unilateral cordons.

“We will thin to one bunch per shoot. We remove all shoulders as soon as possible, usually after bloom but before veraison.

“Our picking decisions are made half on taste and half on chemistry. We want the seeds to be dry and crunchy and skins starting to soften. We like to pick when the flavors get past grapey to the blacker fruit flavors but before they get jammy. Typically, we will pick around 25.5° Brix and get acids in the high .6 to low .7 ranges. Grapes are sorted before and during picking and then bunch-sorted again at the winery. We de-stem with no rollers, adding 20 to 25 ppm SO₂. The must goes to open top tanks where we cold-soak for three to five days using refrigeration and dry ice, seeking a temperature of 50° F. We punch-down once a day during cold soak. We reliably get viable natural yeast to ferment with tanks set to a maximum of 85° F. During fermentation, we alternate punch-downs with pump-overs three times a day. Once we get down to 8° Brix, we punch-down just once a day.

“We have 10 to 12 days’ skin contact and press off around 1° to 2° Brix. We mix the free-run and press juice together but stop pressing between .6 and .8 bar. We’ll settle in tank for 48 to 72 hours and then inoculate for malolactic in the tank before racking to barrels. Our barrels are split 50/50 between French and American with 30 to 40 percent new oak. Post malolactic we’ll SO₂ to 30 ppm free; then 30 to 60 days later, when the wine is de-gassed, we’ll give it a racking. After 14 to 15 months, we’ll rack to bottle. We don’t fine the wine, but we will filter if we need to according to Scorpion test.”

Winemakers' Tasting Notes

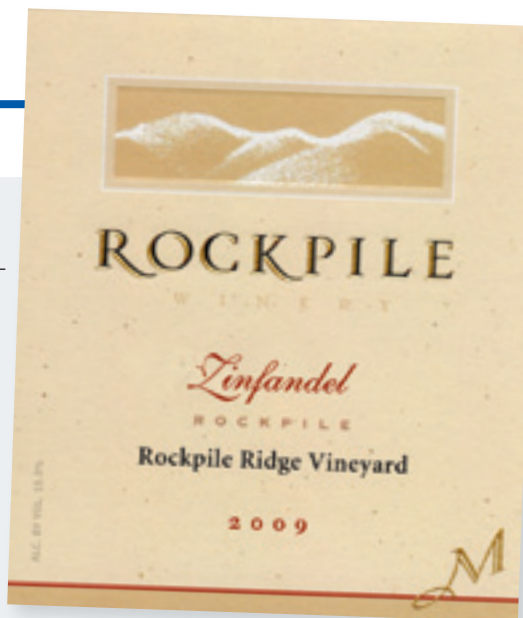
Mauritson: This shows incredible ripeness without being over-ripe along with incredible intensity. There is lots of red minerality in the mouth, almost an iron character. There are nice, rounded, well-developed tannins, not angular at all, that lead to a long finish.

Soto: I get red fruit: cranberry, raspberry aromas. I love the tannins. The wine is well-balanced with good acid and is not hot at all.

Shelton: There is good minerality with some pepper spice and dark, broad fruit. It is well-balanced with a bit of heat on the finish. It is a classic "large man dancing" type of wine.

Jeramaz: Very dark with an intriguing nose full of exotic spice. The wine has big body with huge extraction. There is more fruit on the palate than the nose, and the wine has good acidity. There is no burn in the finish.

Heminway: I like this wine. It is powerful. I like the depth of berry. There is quite a lot of oak, which melds with the dark fruit. There is no problem with residual sugar because the acid balances the wine, and there is tannin to extend the finish and offset any sweetness.



Seps/Williams: We like the nose; it is full of dark, intense fruit. The nose is the strongest part. There is some chocolate and black cherry on the palate, and the wine is slightly sweet. It has good acid and a long sweet finish.

Favero: I get rose, currant and blackberry on the nose. There is a nice entry followed by huge tannin. The tannins are like Cabernet. This would be a good wine to lie down and would be very nice with food.

Chappelle: This has a striking seductive color. There is super clean, dark fruit and some floral character. It is youthful on the palate but a bit one-dimensional. It has a short finish. This is a wine that needs time.

Hall: This is classic Rockpile. It is wonderful, warm and complex with sweet fruit. There is a series of elegant, embracing tannins that drag the fruit into the finish and saturates the finish. This goes beyond normal Zin. There is nothing like Rockpile in Napa.



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Varietal Focus: Zinfandel

Carol Shelton Wines

2007 Rockpile Rocky Reserve Zinfandel

(14.8% alc.) \$33

Carol Shelton studied at UC Davis, working with Ann Noble on the Aroma Wheel and researching how different yeasts affected wine flavors. She worked with wine greats like Robert Mondavi and Andre Tchelistcheff before taking the winemaker position at Windsor Vineyards, a position she held for 19 years. Her inaugural vintage for Carol Shelton Wines was 2000, and the focus was Zinfandel. Currently, she produces 5,000 cases a year annually.



According to Shelton:

“My primary goal is to clearly exhibit the terroir of an individual vineyard. I want balance across the board with full-berry fruit, black pepper and mineral flavors. I’m looking for an elegant style that is finessed and slightly lean with a long finish without any alcoholic burn. I want overall balance of all components from total acidity, pH and alcohol, all the way to ripeness of flavor and fruit-oak balance.

“This block tends to ripen faster than other vineyards in the area and almost always has the smallest berries. It sits at 1,400 feet and has very shallow iron, red top soil (6 to 8 inches). The clone is St. Peter’s Church planted on 110R rootstock in 1997 and runs on bi-lateral cordon. We will drop crop down to one cluster per shoot, remove shoulders if we need to and thin any bunches that might be touching. We usually average about 2 tons to the acre. We usually irrigate in early August but not after, unless we’re trying to survive a heat wave when the fruit is not ripe enough.

“Determining when to harvest is tricky. With Zinfandel, cluster samples are imperative; berry samples just won’t work. We look to harvest between 25° and 26° Brix but go mostly on taste and appearance. We wait for skins to soften with just a bit of shrivel, and we look for concentration of flavor. We also look for a particular white flower to bloom on the vineyard perimeter. It smells like honey and is a great indicator of when we are getting close to picking. Usually, grapes are harvested with .60 to .66 TA and pH in the 3.65 to 3.7 range. If we think post-ml pH will be around 4.0, then we will adjust with tartaric acid before fermentation takes place.

“We hand-pick into ½-ton bins, sorting as we pick. At the winery, we de-stem, without rollers, adding 30 ppm SO₂. The grapes for this vintage were tank-fermented, but subsequent vintages for this vineyard are all fermented in bins with regular punch-downs. Following a cold soak at 50° F, we’ll add D-80 yeast (to increase spiciness and structure) and begin fermentation. Temperatures run in the 70° to 80° F range. We delestage once a day for two to three days at the start and then pump-over twice a day until we get down to 5° Brix. Then we shift to one pump-over daily until at 1° Brix when we stop pumping over and do extended maceration for an average of five days. We press when ready by taste, usually giving us about 20 days’ total skin contact.

“We mix press and free-run juice, pressing up to 1.4 bar because we have found that we get sweeter, more concentrated juice at the end. We settle in tank for two to three days, add malolactic culture and rack to barrel with mixed French and American oak about 50 percent new. We do not rack, but we add 60 ppm SO₂ post malolactic and top every two to three months. The wine spends 18 to 24 months in barrel. We then DE filter and go through a sterile polish filtration. The wine gets up to a year of bottle aging.”

Winemakers' Tasting Notes

Shelton: There is perfumed blackberry and blueberry along with some black pepper and a touch of herbal notes, almost like you can taste the sun on a berry patch. Bright acid plays off the plush fruit and heightens the sense of minerality that is the hallmark of Rockpile terroir. There are fine, polished tannins, which provide a long finish with no heat.

Soto: I get plum with nice spice and a pretty floral character. There is some nice vanilla here along with big chewy tannins that lend the wine a long finish.

Mauritson: There are floral and plum aromas that expand into the flavors with a bit of prune and dark chocolate. This has gracefully aged with notes of chocolate and cocoa. It is very refined and elegant with the structure to age further.

Favero: There is a nice jammy character framed beautifully. She's got the wood just right. In the mouth I get black tea and forest floor with some jam and a spice note on the end. This should cellar for a while.

Carol Shelton



Rocky Reserve

2007
ZINFANDEL
FLORENCE VINEYARD
ROCKPILE

Hall: This presents the elegant side of Rockpile's power. There is some nice red fruit and chocolate with little winemaker influence. The wine is well integrated. Even though it is a lighter style for Rockpile, it remains a powerful wine.

Chappelle: This has a nice combination of dry fruit and spice. There is a layered melding of red and dark fruits, and it shows the generosity of the '07 vintage. It has warmth with balance. It has structure but is drinking well now.

Seps/Williams: There is a bit of oxidation in the nose. There is ripe fruit with a black cherry nose and some mineral character on the palate. It's not sweet, but we don't think it has a lot of aging potential.

Jeramaz: The nose has dark fruit with licorice and spice. There is a nice multi-layered complexity of flavor and no sensation of heat. It has good balance and is my favorite of the flight.

Heminway: It is creamy with apple and berry. There is some sort of drying element here. It is the most acidic wine of the flight, but the acid won't give it a long shelf life.

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Valdez Family Winery

2009 Rockpile Zinfandel

(14.8% alc.) \$40

Ulises Valdez came to the United States in 1995 when he was 16. He started working in vineyards, partnered with **Jack Florence** in vineyard management and grew grapes for some of the most renowned winemakers in Sonoma County. Currently, he manages more than 1,000 vineyard acres, including more than 100 acres of his own.

In 2004 **Valdez Family Wines** produced its first wines made by the likes of **Paul Hobbs**, **Mark Aubert** and **Jeff Cohn**. **Mauricio Soto** joined the team in 2010 as winemaker. He had previously worked for **Paradise Ridge** and **Stryker Sonoma**.



According to Valdez:

“First and foremost, we want to stay true to the vineyard. Rockpile allows us to make a Zinfandel that is elegant, fruit-forward, round and balanced, yet it allows the terroir of the site to show through with minerality, spice and a velvety finish.

“The secret in our vineyards, or those of our clients, is love and passion. Our goal in the vineyard is to take good fruit and elevate it to something terrific. That comes about when each vine is in balance. We train our vineyard workers to evaluate each and every vine and then deal with it as an individual. In effect, we customize each vine within a vineyard.

“Our Rockpile vineyard is planted using St. Peter’s Church clone on 1103P rootstock in red volcanic soil. Vine spacing is 5x8, and elevation is 1,400 feet. We want the clusters to be separated, so we will drop fruit and shoulders just before veraison. We will leaf enough to provide dappled light but not direct sun.

“We pick at full maturity by watching pH and tasting. We want flavors to shift to darker fruits, with 90 percent brown seeds that have gone crunchy. Sugars usually run 26° to 27° Brix, and we aim for pH under 3.7.

“Grapes are hand-picked at night and at the winery by 9 a.m. Grapes are sorted in the vineyard prior to picking, then again during picking and yet again on an incline conveyor if necessary. We de-stem using no rollers, followed by a Tommy shaker that removes jack stems, green berries and raisins. Our must is mostly whole berries. It receives 30 ppm SO₂ and goes to 4-ton, open-top fermenters. We cold-soak at 50° F for four to six days and then add Rockpile 15 or D-80 yeast. We punch-down twice a day during cold soak, three times a day during fermentation and four times a day at peak fermentation when temperatures will hit 85° F. Fermentation takes about 10 days so skin contact runs 15 days on average.

“We press at 1° Brix up to 1.5 bar with all free-run juice going to tank and then on to barrel. The press juice gets bulked out. Our barrels are all French with 30 to 40 percent new oak. When sugar tests below 2 grams per liter, we’ll add malolactic to the barrel and then top every five weeks until we bottle after 18 months’ oak aging. We rack the wine to tank and then bottle unfiltered. Our wines receive one full year of bottle aging before release.”



Winemakers’ Tasting Notes

Soto: *There is dark fruit with some floral character. There is lots of granite, flinty minerality with a very rich, mocha finish. It is elegant wine.*

Shelton: *This shares the same floral qualities as mine with more minerality and spice. It has good density with soft tannins and the right acidity to balance the fruit. There is a chocolate finish from the oak.*

Mauritson: *This has distinct minerality, almost like lead pencil, along with pretty herbal and floral notes. There is a soft, broad entry with lots of complex flavors reminiscent of Dr Pepper. This is a youthful wine, with lots of life left in it.*

Heminway: *This has muted fruit with lots of oak in the nose. There is some black fruit flavor here, but it is buried in the oak. It is dry with a long finish and could probably benefit with some aeration. It’s a bit hot on the end.*

Jeramaz: *This is over-extracted and oaky. There is more oak than fruit. It is jammy and sweet on the palate. I don’t recognize it as Zinfandel. It’s one of those good “international” red wines.*

Seps/Williams: *There is lots of tobacco and oak. There is an herbal element from the oak with some blackberry, but most of the fruit is lost. The palate has good penetration and length, but it doesn’t taste like Zinfandel. I think it would do quite well in a Napa Valley Cabernet tasting.*

Hall: *This is a bit disappointing. It is powerful with black tea and meat but has a smaller range of flavor than the others. There are narrow concentrated tannins which over-emphasize the tannin power, so the fruit is out of balance. The finish opens with fruit but finishes with an acidic hardness. I think winemaking overpowers terroir here.*

Chappelle: *This is big, bold and ripe with an exceptional purity of high quality fruit. It is complex with layers of dark fruit with tea and some Asian spice. It is dense and youthful, and the alcohol is well-integrated.*

Favero: *This has the most intense nose of the flight with tobacco and chocolate. It has a round mid-palate. The tannins envelop the whole mouth, and then the fruit comes swimming out. The finish has allspice and clove.*

Conclusion

All of our winemakers agree on one thing: Zinfandel is the most difficult wine to make. This difficulty starts in the vineyard. Zinfandel ripens unevenly. Bunches are huge with large grapes and thin skins, so mold and rot are a constant concern. Trying to achieve a more uniform ripening requires a tremendous amount of skilled labor: trimming the shoulders and tips of bunches, removing clusters that are too close together and dropping green fruit. Canopies need to be rigorously controlled so they allow enough sunlight to ripen the grapes but not enough to raisin the fruit, while still providing avenues for good air circulation around the bunches.

Determining when to pick is agonizing for winemakers, and the margin for error is less than for other varietals. Pick too soon and the wine is acidic without the lush fruit and berry character that gives Zinfandel its vibrant charm. Pick too late and that fruit and berry charm devolves into prune, hot and possibly sweet flavors. You can even hit everything just right, only to find out two days later that dissolving raisins have raised your sugar levels 2° to 3° Brix. Zinfandel demands patience, and winemakers need to wait for the grapes to mature, but waiting too long can produce grapes that override their personal vision.

The difficulties don't end in the vineyard. Once in the winery, winemakers must assiduously cull out any bad fruit. The constant high sugars make the fermentation technique critically important. Oxygen introduced through pump-overs, punch-downs and delestage is needed to help maintain healthy yeast, hopefully enough to carry fermentations to dryness. Getting malolactic to finish in the face of high alcohol can be daunting.

For the consumer, Zinfandel styles are all over the map. The Napa Zinfandels, while very different from one another, all shared the same relatively low alcohol and a more restrained flavor profile. The Rockpile Zins all showed great power and extraction, whether it be the more subtle Carol Shelton or the more aggressive Rockpile and Valdez. The Sonoma County flight showed the blended, briary balance of Quivira, the rich power of Monte Rosso and the intense highly extracted character of Mazzocco.

One of the great charms of Zinfandel is that it always surprises you. There is a warmth and vitality in the sheer lusciousness of fruit that is irresistible. It is a wine without pretension; and when you find one that you like, it cries out to be shared with friends. Clearly, one of the attractions for our winemakers is that Zinfandel is so challenging to make, but achieving their goal in the face of those challenges evidently brings a matchless satisfaction. **WBM**

Editor's Note: Prior to this month's Zinfandel Varietal Focus, author Lance Cutler wrote about Chardonnay in January 2012, Syrah in February of 2011 and Pinot Noir in September of 2011 (search our magazine archive at winebusiness.com/wbm).

In January 2013, Cabernet Sauvignon will be featured.



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