

The Mystery of Zin



Rick Staff
with a remit to sniff, taste,
and spit his way around Nanjing
and disseminate the drinkable.

POINT SYSTEM

| | |
|-------|----------------------------------|
| 0-10 | A WARNING |
| 11-14 | A Feasible Party Prop |
| 15-17 | Heartily Recommended |
| 17-19 | Exceptionally Good |
| 20 | The Apogee Of WINE EXPRESSION |



■ Zinfandel, or 'Zin' as its often shortened to, is a grape seemingly weaved indelibly deep into the wine valleys and lore of California. Indeed, it was when California's enterprising but empty handed gold prospectors in the mid-nineteenth century turned their hands to farming that Zinfandel really took root, thriving in the warm climate and with seemingly no connection to any other country giving the impression of a very American vine and wine. Then came the unsettling scientific findings in the early 1990's which unequivocally established the varietal as genetically identical to Primitivo whose home under that moniker is Puglia, right on the heel of Italy's suddenly aggressive looking boot. Who shipped to who first? However, such was Zinfandel's success Primitivo somewhat capitulated by taking up the Zin synonym abroad to cash in on the better known grape name, backed by an old world winemaking pedigree. However, the mists were not completely cleared until as recently as 2001 when any hitherto hypotheses as to origin were kiboshed by the forensic gifts of Professor Carole Meredith of Davis while exploring Croatia's Dalmatian coast (following research suggesting the grape must be a parent of Croatia's Pravać Mali). There Zinfandel's DNA was established to be exactly the same as the local grape Crljenak Kaštelanski (known also as Tribidrag). Science has decreed Croatia as Zinfandel's birthplace, yet there still remains an intriguing etymological puzzle over the American name for the grape. Zinfandel has curious hints of German to the ear if not on the tongue, and this time it's the historians who can shed some light. Archives unearthed by one doggedly determined Charles L Sullivan suggest the grapes first appeared in America's Long Island in the 1820s via the Imperial Nursery in Vienna and were most likely obtained during the Habsburg Monarchy's rule over Croatia (eventually making their way to Boston enjoying widespread success as table grapes before they went out west). There is indeed an Austrian grape with a suspiciously similar name, Zierfandler, though this does not remotely resemble Zinfandel, being white and sweet, it is surely a reasonable supposition that a fit of national pride and phonetic expedience led the Austrians to label the shipment after one of their own. Add a dash of American and there you have it. Zinfandel. Well, it works for me.

America's signature varietal may be challenged in lineage but arguably the best manifestation of Zinfandel is from roots that are old, deep and Californian. However, soon in the shadow of the rising popularity of such perceived sophisticates as Cabernet, Zinfandel's development as a 'serious' wine was further hampered by the voluminous offerings of the pink – 'blush' – version, at their height in the '70s and '80s, and where the wine is quickly bled off the grape skins to produce a pale pink colour. Blush, as it is termed and blush the makers should with such anaemic offerings in the main. The thick set wines hewn out of the dramatically gnarled shapes of old vine Zin have thankfully ultimately eclipsed this dalliance, delivering the gravitas in the glass you might expect. Something that purports all those attributes resides in BHG; Bold Vine Old Vine Zinfandel 2012, to be exact. No empty promise this either as mocha coffee, chocolate and blackcurrant follow a gorgeous whack of fresh strawberry on the nose, the rich flavours oscillating on the buds before a hint of black pepper at the finish resonates as you contemplate the next splendid sip. As the wind was blowing from the north east and I was wearing brown shoes, and, more crucially, it was the weekend, mine was discounted 30% and thus a fantastic bargain at ¥99 (look out for the seemingly random deals at BHG which are usually signed in Chinese and occasionally reveal a very reasonable price within a generally expensive shop), but still very much one to seek out at the full price of ¥138 making the perfect technicolour foil for a grey-brown hunker down indoor winter day (18 points). 