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[Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons get the buzz, but the region's Zinfandels are a hidden treasure](#)

- Stephen Yafa, Special to The Chronicle

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If the bejeweled, pampered and exquisitely groomed celebrity Cabernet Sauvignons of Napa Valley gathered at a posh bash to celebrate one another's latest rave reviews, and in walked Napa Valley Zinfandel, the festivities would come to a screeching halt.

A doorman would intercept the gate-crasher. "You in the jeans and work shirt, you want the service entrance," he'd say.

Napa Cabernet is Ralph Fiennes tooling down an English lane in a sleek Aston Martin; Napa Zin is Vin Diesel behind the wheel of a mud-splattered Dodge Ram pickup. So runs the conventional wisdom.

But as the Jan. 28 Zinfandel Advocates & Producers tasting in San Francisco demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt, a handful of the most polished, complex and enticing Zinfandels produced anywhere in California originate in Napa Valley.

They receive only a fraction of the media buzz devoted to the fruity, jammy Zinfandels of Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma County; the blueberry-character, chocolatey Zins of Paso Robles; and the earthy, smoky Zinfandels of Amador County -- and they garner barely a blip in comparison to Napa's superstar Cabernet Sauvignons. Yet when tasted against more than 600 Zinfandels poured by 272 producers for about 8,600 visitors at ZAP, many of these Napa Valley offerings glistened as radiantly as fine crystal.

By common consensus, the difference is the dirt.

"It's that famous Rutherford Bench dust," says Charles Olken, founder and publisher of the Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine in Alameda. Olken, who has rated thousands of Zins in close to 30 years, has in mind the elusive dusty-spicy element in Napa Valley wines that uniquely enhances their intense, deep berry flavors. Juicy, concentrated fruit performs an adroit balancing act with herbs and earthy minerals. For Olken, it contributes "suggestions of nuance."

No one appreciates Napa Valley's true grit more than Ehren Jordan, who's been making Napa Zins for Turley Wine Cellars in St. Helena since 1995. His intensely concentrated, hedonistic

wines like Turley's Hayne Vineyard Zinfandel often sell out in weeks and typically fetch hundreds of dollars at auction.

"The alluvial fan doesn't stop at Zinfandel Lane," he says, even if that happens to be the official northern boundary of the Rutherford Bench viticulture area.

The fan Jordan is referring to is a clamshell-shaped deposit of geological material spreading out downslope from the Mayacamas Mountains.

Beginning north of Yountville and stretching just north of Rutherford, the 6-mile Bench runs along the west side of Highway 29, and includes an eastern area bordering the highway between Oakville and Rutherford.

"That alluvial fan mix of well-drained volcanic gravel and sandy loam delivers a taste that's unique," he says. "It's soft and supple, with a power core behind it that you don't find anywhere else. It's what gives these Zins an iron fist in a velvet glove."

Grown on expensive land

To Jordan, that distinctive structure helps explain why there are still old Zinfandel vineyards in Napa Valley -- for the moment, at least -- when Cabernet properties are changing hands at up to \$350,000 an acre. According to Wine Market Report, that's the price Francis Ford Coppola paid in 2002 for the Cohn vineyard adjacent to his Rubicon Estate property in Rutherford.

"As the new generations of those first farming families keep off-selling their ancestors' vineyards to large conglomerates who want to convert to Cab, what gets tossed out first?" asks Jordan. "Those old Zin vines that produce less tonnage per acre that sells for less money, two strikes against it when premium Napa Cabs claim the higher ground in price structure at \$100 a bottle and up."

Top-flight Napa Zins rarely cost more than \$38.

At the 2004 harvest, Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon grapes averaged \$4,800 a ton, Napa Zinfandel, about \$3,000. Someone -- buyers remain anonymous in the annual California Department of Food and Agriculture Grape Crush Report -- paid \$20,081 a ton for 28 tons of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon; someone else paid \$7,831 per ton for 107 tons. No one paid more than \$4,600 a ton for Napa Valley Zinfandel.

The best defense being a strong offense, Turley Wine Cellars buys as many of its most trusted Napa Valley Zinfandel growers' vineyards as possible -- 45 acres to date -- in order to preserve its sources.

One irony of such machinations is that passionate Napa Zinfandel artisan winemakers -- Jordan, George Hendry at Hendry Ranch Winery, Jerry Seps at Storybook Mountain Vineyards, David Brown at Brown Estate and Duane David Dappen at D-Cubed Cellars among them -- are determined to survive another day to produce Zins that share flavor and aroma characteristics with -- what else? -- Napa Cabernet.

The term most often bandied about by them is "claret-like." Claret is the British term for red Bordeaux wines, which are made from Cabernet family grape varieties. It's a touchy subject.

"Rule No. 1: Don't try to make Cab out of Zin, and definitely never try to make Zin out of

Cab," says Bo Barrett, winemaker at Chateau Montelena in Calistoga, which produces both varietals.

But these winemakers wouldn't mind if their efforts resulted in a Zinfandel that displayed unmistakable Napa claret-like grace notes: A little cassis, even a hint of anise, oaky caramel to round off the edges, and above all else, finesse. If that isn't Zinfandel's usual calling card, maybe it should be, in their not-too-humble opinion.

"Zin can be an in-your-face wine that doesn't fit with a lot of foods," says Dappen, whose D-Cubed Cellars in St. Helena derives its 3-D moniker from his name. "I'm looking for more elegance, more complexity. Zin's not known for it, true. But with our soil, with a subtle use of oak, mostly French, and cold-soaking and reasonably low alcohol levels, it's what I strive for."

Then again, Dappen keeps in mind what people love in Zin: "It's a fun, relaxed, bright, vibrant grape."

Finessing all the life out of it makes little sense by any reckoning, and he's savvy enough not to burn down this vinous village in order to save it.

After graduating from the enology program at UC Davis, Dappen moved up from cellar worker at Grgich Hills in Rutherford to cellar master at Storybook Mountain, Seps' winery north of Calistoga. After a few more stops, he launched D-Cubed in 1994 with Howell Mountain Zinfandel grapes sourced largely from the Black Sears Vineyard. In 1996, he also became winemaker at Brown Estate in Napa Valley's Chiles Valley, for which he still consults.

A circle of friends

Dappen's winemaking tells you something about why Napa Zins tend to share similar flavor and texture profiles. It's the soil, but it's also the growers and winemakers. Like Dappen, they tend to migrate and cross-pollinate within their tight little island.

In fact, any map tracking the movement of grapes and winemakers in Napa Valley's Zinfandel community soon becomes such a welter of intersecting lines and circles that it could easily be mistaken for a Jackson Pollock canvas.

Uniformity of style is one result. For many sophisticated Zin lovers, it's a style worth repeating, while for those who like their Zins with a hearty quotient of the more textbook bramble and brawn, it's not.

One Napa Valley appellation, Howell Mountain, dramatically straddles both camps. Its Zinfandel fruit typically delivers a white-pepper kick, dark-berry richness and edgy tannins.

Turley's Jordan blends the fruit he gets from Black Sears, a 20-acre vineyard at 2,400-foot elevation on Howell Mountain, with valley floor grapes; so do Dappen and Ray Coursen, winemaker-owner at Elyse Winery near Yountville. These grapes get around.

Jerre and Joyce Black Sears reserve just enough fruit to make 300 cases under their own Black Sears Howell Mountain label. There's nothing tame about any of this wine. It's intense. It can be as rawboned as a horse wrangler's knuckles or deeply sensuous in the hands of a talented craftsman like Ted Lemon, whose wines for Sears age superbly and mellow out in five or more years.

Even so, edgy tannins at any stage are not characteristic in Zins, which are meant to greet you at the door with open arms. They're famously fruit-forward, ready when you are and primed to party.

Dave Pramuk, one of four partners in Robert Biale Vineyards in the Oak Knoll area, keeps that in mind.

"It's true we make more polished, well-knit, even elegant Zins in Napa," he says. "But at Biale, which began as a Zinfandel vineyard 70 years ago, we make sure we don't ignore the grape's roots."

A grape with a history

That heritage is inextricably bound up with the history of the state, and with the immigrant experience of thousands of Italian farming families like Aldo Biale's, who settled the best grape-growing areas and chose to plant flavorful Zinfandel, a grape that adapted well to all sorts of different soils and climates.

"There had to be a reason the best old Zin vineyards in Napa Valley and elsewhere made it through Prohibition," Jordan says. "They weren't torn out to make room for walnuts and prunes because the most skilled growers planted them in exactly the right spot, in the right soil to dry-farm healthy, strong and disease-resistant crops. Year after year, they produced quality wines with low maintenance -- and they continue to."

If that wine tasted more than a little like something from the Old Country, small wonder: genetically, Zinfandel and Italian Primitivo are the same grape variety. So, too, is Crljenak Kastelanski, from Croatia, which has been confirmed by plant geneticist Carole Meredith, now retired from UC Davis, and her colleagues to be the birthplace of Zinfandel.

Crljenak (tzerl-YEN-ak) flourished along the Dalmatian Coast for centuries before it arrived in America in the early 1800s, where it eventually made its way from a Long Island nursery to California.

Once it got here, growers like Aldo Biale quickly discovered a ready market for a grape that produced cheap, high-alcohol wines with plenty of punch. They sold tons of it in bulk. Winos practically bathed in Zinfandel. They spilled so much that they more or less painted the back alleys of North Beach a vibrant shade of purple.

Then in the late 1960s, a funny thing happened -- Zinfandel became respectable.

Serious winemakers like Paul Draper at Ridge Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains took a shine to Zinfandel and began messing with it in ways that amounted to an assault on its blue-collar origins or a classy makeover, depending on your point of view. They added oak, French and American, smoothed Zin's rough edges, and taught it to curtsy.

Now, some 30 years later, vines planted by first-generation growers like Biale produce fewer, yet more complex-tasting grapes than they did close to a century ago.

Not all of Napa's Zinfandel plantings go back as far. Most came into existence in the 1970s or later as Zin moved uptown.

At the foot of Mount Veeder in southern Napa Valley, applied physicist George Hendry decided

to devote several blocks of the homestead vineyard to Zinfandel to test how it might perform in that rich, loamy, Rutherford dust-laced soil.

At about the same time, 30 miles north, Stanford instructor Seps and his wife, Sigrid, bought Storybook Mountain, a steep hillside Zinfandel vineyard where red clay and loam prevail. They expanded in all directions and took a gamble that red clay with a touch of dust, in the absence of chemical herbicides and insecticides, could produce world-class Zinfandels.

And a few years later, a physician from Pasadena and his wife, Bassett and Marcela Brown, decided to teach their three young children the meaning of real work by purchasing a 450-acre ranch 9 miles east of the Silverado Trail in Chiles Valley. They soon began planting Zinfandel in moderately fertile silt loam on alluvial fans.

There are three very different microclimates -- high heat in the north, cooler temperatures in the south and frigid fog-drenched summer nights -- in Chiles Valley. There are three markedly different soil types as well -- a crash-course in terroir, since location and climate play a prominent role in developing the individual personalities of these wines.

Today Hendry, Seps and the Browns turn out Zinfandels that are unmistakably Napa-style in their delicate balance, yet distinctly different from one another.

The grape, they've learned, is surprisingly finicky -- thin-skinned, vulnerable to mold, unwilling to ripen uniformly and sure to raisin unless tended with meticulous care.

"There's a wonderful European saying that the wine that grows best, grows in the shade of the wine grower," says Jerry Seps, who helped start ZAP in 1990, as he trudges up the terraced slope behind his winery. Taking that advice to heart, he's been out among his 43 acres of vines almost daily for 30 years -- trellising, pruning, weeding and dropping fruit.

Fire sale

The Seps were able to purchase Storybook in 1976 on his professor's salary only because it had been abandoned for 12 years after a fire. Legendary winemaker Andre Tchelistcheff came by, looked at the soil and eastern exposure, and said, "Plant Zin." The Seps took his advice.

"We decided to do one thing only, and do it well," Jerry Seps explains. Doing it well meant doing it organically. "We wanted our grapes to derive their flavor from the ground, not the chemical input that goes into the ground."

Storybook's estate wines define the influence of organic red clay and a mountainous Calistoga microclimate on this venerable grape. They deliver dark berry fruit, loads of tannic grip and an invitation to lay them down for at least three years after release so that they relax into maturity.

Not so the Zins that David Brown, 38, son of Bassett and Marcela, makes at Brown Estate in consultation with Dappen, with assistance from Brown's sisters, Celia Deneen (marketing) and Coral (sales). The nighttime fog, 50-degree diurnal temperature that swings in Chiles Valley during the summer and richer soils produce Zins with crisp acids balanced by lush fruit.

"It takes a ton of labor to manage the enormous crops that Zin will throw, especially vines like ours that are only 16 years old," David Brown says.

While old vines produce meager yields, young vines require endless cane pruning, canopy

control and cutting off of unwanted grape clusters before harvest. Large crops from younger vines ripen unevenly; the interior clusters that don't get enough air readily develop mold. Thinning out leaves and fruit throughout the growing season can be an exhaustive, daily grind.

But diligent labor is something the Brown children learned the hard way.

"Our parents gave us two career choices -- become a doctor or become a garbage person," Celia Brown says. "All three of us were en route to become garbage people. After college, we had to decide, what are we going to do with the rest of our lives? This ranch was our parents' getaway. It was also our work farm as kids if we got bad grades."

Coral picks up the story: "They'd pile us in the car on Friday after school, we'd drive nine hours, and after that we had to do all sorts of chores on this old property. We hated it. Then we grew up, something clicked, and we realized the gift we'd all been given by our parents. This is what we wanted to do, start our own winery here. We were bonded to the place."

Why Zin?

"We wanted to produce a wine that was fun, youthful like us, and -- in 1996 when we started -- reasonably cheap."

Since then, the Browns have come a long way and their table was one of the busiest at the January ZAP tasting, where their 2003 Chiles Valley and Napa Zins were clear winners.

Home on the ranch

Equally impressive are George Hendry's wines. He still lives in the same house where he grew up. It's now surrounded by the vineyards he planted.

"It was pretty clear if we were gonna keep our ranch from turning into houses, it was gonna be grapes, because cows, chickens and prunes weren't paying the bills," he says.

The first vines were planted in the 1970s and sold mostly to Robert Mondavi Winery. In 1992, Hendry decided to make a few hundred cases of his own wine, adhering to a personal set of Zin commandments: "The wine shall not be sweet. The alcohol shall be under control. The oak shall be decently integrated."

Today, three blocks of Hendry Ranch produce distinctly different Zinfandels. Blocks 24 and 28 convert rich loam into ripe berry fruit with alcohol, earthy undertones, light tannins and mild oak -- quintessential Napa Zinfandel at its, um, claret-like best. These wines achieve their restraint from a process called saignee, in which a portion of the juice is bled away from freshly pressed grapes to reduce sugar and keep alcohol levels hovering around 14 percent, up to a full point lower than most Zins.

Hendry's unorthodox approach captures the determination of Napa's artisan Zin producers to follow their own muse. ZAP may stand for Zinfandel Advocates and Producers; in Napa, it could just as easily be an acronym for Zealots Acting Passionately. A perfect case is ZAP's president, Julie Johnson, owner of Tres Sabores ("Three Tastes") winery nestled against the western hills of Rutherford.

A few years back, Johnson decided to hire not one, but three top Napa Valley winemakers to produce Zins from the same organic estate fruit harvest, each in his or her own style. That's not

the sort of experiment likely to turn a fast profit, as Johnson discovered when she tried to sell all three resulting wines side by side in a three-pack. Her approach might be considered foolhardy from a business perspective, yet the grape spoke to her heart and she listened, three times.

"Our Zinfandel is so complex I thought it deserved special treatment," Johnson says. "It's a grape that reveals tremendous character in the right hands."

Character, and class, too. In its Napa renditions, it's exactly the sort of refined wine you'd proudly pour for the swells at a posh bash, long before the Cabernet Sauvignon runs out.

A taste of some of Napa County's finest Zinfandels

Despite the insistence of Napa Valley winemakers that fruit comes first in their Zinfandels, polish and smoothness trump ripe berry juiciness. Just about all of the wines I tasted appear to be deliberately styled to stress their claret-like finesse, sometimes at the expense of pure varietal expression. With one notable exception, none of these 13 Napa Valley offerings, out of 37 I tasted, is likely to be mistaken for a classic brambly, jammy California Zinfandel. Yet there are plenty of substantial differences among them in depth, balance and style.

2003 Brown Estate Chiles Valley Zinfandel (\$42) A winning combination of fresh, ripe raspberry and dark earthy flavors and aromas, it displays subtle oak and firm tannins. Juicy yet no overpowering fruit bomb, it has plenty of depth and a long creamy finish.

2003 Chateau Montelena Montelena Estate Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$28) In this medium-bodied Zin, dark fruit, integrated oak and subtle vanilla flavors mingle with zesty raspberry. Smooth texture and a lingering hint of mocha create a pleasantly lengthy finish.

2003 D-Cubed Cellars Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$25) Sweet black cherry and an unmistakable sassafras undertone add an inviting dimension to this medium-weight wine that also delivers succulent blackberry fruit. It ingratiates with delicate balance, silky texture and subtle oak accents.

2003 Elyse Morisoli Vineyard Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$37) There's lots of pepper behind the fruit, and loads of tannin, though no bitterness. It's a big, weighty wine with high alcohol, well-integrated oak, cinnamon, black tea and black fruit. Some Zins lose focus with age; this should gain complexity with no fruit drop-out. If you cellar it for five years, you'll open a much more refined wine.

2003 Hendry Block 28 Zinfandel (\$31) This is a well-balanced, refined yet muscular Zin. An oxymoron? So be it. It exudes blueberry and dark-cherry fruit with loads of glycerin, but with subdued alcohol and tannins. It's warm, friendly and worth aging three to five years.

2001 Howell Mountain Vineyards Black Sears Vineyard Zinfandel (\$38) In an area famed for dense, inky Cabernet Sauvignons, this skillfully layered Zin delivers a touch of smokiness, red plum fruit and well-integrated dark cocoa. It's had time to relax its tannic pucker without losing its grip. It's a terrific, complex food wine.

2003 Robert Biale Stagecoach Vineyards Zinfandel (\$36) A mountain-grown wine, made from a vineyard at about 1,000 feet above Oakville, this Zinfandel is sinewy and bold with crisp acidity and a firm tannic grip. There's an excellent integration of oak, with allspice as well as

red plum and blackberry.

2003 Rosenblum Cellars Block 7 Hendry Vineyard Zinfandel (\$40) Bright cherry fruit is struggling here to get out from under the abundant caramelized vanilla oak. There are hints of blackberry, raspberry and cola in both aroma and taste.

2003 Rubicon Estate Edizione Pennino Rutherford Zinfandel (\$38) Named for Francis Ford Coppola's maternal grandfather, the Pennino is boisterously Italian with sweet fruit, lots of woody cedar and spice. In time, it's sure to become a tasty complement to grilled meats, once the tannins settle down.

2004 Summers Villa Andriana Vineyard Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$30) Like the superbly focused 2003, which recently sold out, this wine from 40-year-old vines displays fleshy fruit. Its medium-weight, bright fruit and nuanced vanilla oak undertones with crisp acidity resolve in a long, smooth finish. It's a best-buy that will reward patience if aged at least 12 months. To be released in April.

2003 The Terraces Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$25) This is the only Zin I tasted that offered varietal briar as well as spice character. It's a big wine but not at all coarse. Owner/winemaker Timm Crull crafts this reasonably priced Zin with a delicate touch, but not at the expense of fruit-forward zestiness. It should improve with time in the bottle.

2002 Tres Sabores Rudy Zuidema Cuvee Rutherford Zinfandel (\$30) This is as close to a quaffer as Zin is likely to get without being white. Rudy Zuidema, one of three winemakers given the same grape from the same vineyard that year, turns out a medium-light-bodied wine with a soft mouthfeel and crisp red fruit.

2004 Turley Wine Cellars Hayne Vineyard Zinfandel (\$75) At this price, it had better be top-notch, and it is. The notable exception to Napa-styled Zinfandel, it's a ripe, gentle giant that delivers jammy black fruit and currant with spicy anise and mocha flavors. It also has a silky texture and good acidity, and a mile-long finish. Beautifully structured, the wine is a few years away from its peak, yet immensely drinkable. This and other limited-bottling Turley releases sell out fast.

-- Stephen Yafa

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