

**THE FORTNIGHTLY CLUB**  
**OF REDLANDS, CALIFORNIA**

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REDLANDS, CALIFORNIA

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Meeting number 2002  
4:00 P.M.

**“Zinfandel: Croatia’s Gift to California”**

**John M. Tincher**

**Assembly Room, A.K. Smiley Public Library**

## **Background of the Author**

John Tincher was born in Hollywood California. Living in the family of a Methodist minister meant that he was raised in several different towns in Southern California before graduating from Van Nuys High School in the San Fernando Valley in 1960. He received his BA from the University of Redlands in 1964 and a Master of Divinity degree from Drew University, Madison, New Jersey in 1969. Following seminary graduation, he was ordained into the United Methodist ministry and served several churches in Northern California prior to his final pastoral appointment as senior pastor of the 800 member, First United Methodist Church in Turlock California. He spent a second career in educational fundraising beginning with a position on the development team at the University of Redlands. The last 15 years of his working life were spent as a self-employed consultant in non-profit development deferred giving programs.

In addition to these full-time careers, he spent 22 years as a chaplain in the United States Air Force Reserve retiring at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He holds a lifetime Community College Teaching Credential and taught, part time, at three different Community Colleges and at the University of California, Riverside Campus, Extension Division. He holds a California State License as a Marriage Family and Child Counselor as well as a California Real Estate Brokers' License. His brief political career was comprised of one 4-year term on the City Council of the City of Big Bear Lake where he also served one term as Mayor. In 2022, he was honored to receive the Distinguished Service Award from the Alumni Association of the University of Redlands.

His first wife, Cora, passed away in 2002. He and his second wife, Karen, were married in 2007. Between them they have 4 children and enjoy occasionally spoiling 13 grandchildren.

## **A brief Summary of the Paper**

Written by a man who was raised in a tea totaling family, this paper attempts to present the interesting background of a wine grape that the author feels has contributed to the great success of winemaking in California. The history of the grapes' expansion from Croatia and to other European countries, and finally, to California will be discussed. Consultations with a winemaker who produces large quantities of Zinfandel wine each year, as well as with vintners in Croatia, will help us understand some of the unique qualities of this grape, especially in the winemaking process. The author makes no attempt to be an expert in the production of wine. He is merely one who has come to appreciate Zinfandel wine and its special place among the wines of California.

## Zinfandel: Croatia's Gift to California

A paper by John M. Tincher

I grew up being told by my mother and my Methodist Minister father that the consumption of alcoholic drinks bordered on being a sin and evil. Never mind the fact that Jesus obviously partook of the fruit of the vine in his time (although vintners suggest that the alcohol content of wine was much less in those days). So, by way of introduction to this paper, I would like to briefly describe how my own understanding of the existence of alcoholic beverages, especially wine, was changed as I discovered Zinfandel wine.

As a student at the University of Redlands and a member of the Chi Sigma Chi fraternity, I was one of a very few men who did not join in the drinking of beer during most weekends. I graduated from the U of R in 1964 and entered seminary in 1965. It wasn't long after that year that the United Methodist Church decided to ask all of its seminarians to sign a pledge not to drink alcoholic beverages. The effort went over like a lead balloon. When it was determined that having sufficient ministers in the future was more important than this personally invasive pledge, it was dropped.

Later that year I was serving as an associate pastor in a large church in Long Island and tasked with staff involvement with our very active young adult group. One night this group invited my wife and I to attend one of their dinners. When the wine came out, we realized we didn't know anything about wine, but thought we might try some on our own sometime. So, being completely ignorant, I decided to purchase a bottle of wine without consulting anyone for suggested appropriate wines. I took it home and we opened our bottle of **Thunderbird** and realized we had made a big mistake. For the next year we imbibed on some sweet fruit wines whose labels I, fortunately, can no longer remember.

Following seminary on the East Coast, I was assigned, by the bishop in Los Angeles, to a mission church in Los Osos, then a village just south of Morro Bay, Ca. In Los Osos many of the residents were our age. So, it was an invitation to a very active social life. We soon became familiar with the wine of choice among these residents and church members. It was then a popular jug wine vinted by the **Carlos Rossi** Winery.

We were also introduced to the need to occasionally escape the cold summers (temperatures in the mid to upper 60s') by traveling north and east to the cities of Atascadero, Templeton and Paso Robles. The temperature in these towns was usually 30 to 35 degrees warmer in the summer. On one such adventure one of our friends suggested we visit a winery in the Templeton area while we were there. The name of the winery, which still exists, is **Rotta Winery**. As we drove into the dirt parking lot we were greeted by an elderly woman in combat boots whom we soon referred to as "Momma Rotta". It was one of a small number of wineries in the area in the late 60s' and early 70s'. Obviously, things were very different at wineries in those days because we were allowed to bring our own bottles, or use theirs, and were offered a selection of Zinfandel wines. I named them by the amount of sediment which ended up in the bottom of jug bottles: unleaded had only about half an inch of sediment, regular about one inch of sediment, and high usually yielded about an inch and one half at the bottom of a jug or

bottle. Although white Zinfandel was becoming popular about that time, it was not offered at this winery. We soon learned to enjoy the rich flavor of the Zinfandel Grape. Thus began a love affair with a grape that continues to be my favorite and the reason to explore its history and uniqueness in the wine industry. And, because I discovered it in the Paso Robles area and continue to enjoy it from there, I will be referring primarily to Zinfandel in that region throughout this paper.

### **A brief history of the Zinfandel Grape**

The Crljenak Kastelanski grape, also called Tribidrag in Croatia, later to become known as Zinfandel, was discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Croatia. The vine was planted and discussed in Italian publications in 1870 where it became known as the Primitivo or Primativus grape because of its tendency to ripen earlier than some other varieties. As it spread throughout Europe, it soon found its way into Austria and Hungary which is where it is believed to have come from as it entered the United States. However, unlike Cabernet whose roots are usually considered Bordeaux, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay thought to have come from the soils of Burgundy, or the wine most revered from the valley of the Rhine, Riesling, Zinfandel has always been difficult to assign to a particular region. Horticulturist, George Gibbs, is believed to have received shipments of Primitivo cuttings in our country between 1820 and 1829. In 1830 he visited Boston and his friend; Samuel Perkins was known to have begun to sell Zenfandel. (The spelling changed later)

It was William Prince, author of “A Treatise on Wine” written in 1830, who discovered that the black grape which was to be known as Zinfandel was not only a good table grape, but also dried to a perfect raisin. In 1850 he and another nurseryman took Zinfandel grapes with them to California during the Gold Rush. Thought to be the same as the Black St. Peters grape, well known in California at that time, it was soon to be known as a distinct variety, Zinfandel. Joseph Osborne is thought to have been the first person in California to use the Zinfandel grape for winemaking. His vineyard, located near Napa, was most productive around 1857. By the end of the nineteenth century, it became the most popular red wine in California.

Although many vines were destroyed during prohibition, those left to grow would soon be valued for being old vine Zin, after they were more than 50 years of age. Winemaking at home was not illegal during prohibition so locals living near remaining vines were able to make their own Zinfandel wine. Efforts to share the grape with folks on the East Coast proved to be challenging due to rot as it made the long journey east.

As most of us in this group will remember, Zinfandel became very popular across our country after Bob Trinchero, of Sutter Home Winery, decided, around 1972, to experiment with the Zin grape by extracting the skins earlier in the process than was usual to produce what would be known as White Zinfandel. What may not be widely known is that he tried to market it as a dry white wine using a Swiss name, Oiel de Perdix. When the Bureau of Alcohol and Tobacco insisted on an English translation, the wine became known as White Zinfandel. Most of us would not agree that White Zinfandel is the dry wine he was seeking to produce. This sweetness was the result of a

problem Trinchero experienced while aging his blush wine. The yeast died off early meaning that not all of the sugar turned to alcohol, thus producing a sugarier wine than he had envisioned. He decided to sell the wine anyway. Soon it would become so popular that it accounted for nearly 10% of all wine sales, enjoying accolades from around our country. The lack of drinkable white wine led other vintners to use red grapes to produce similar light-colored roses as well as to copy Sutter Home's use of the Zinfandel grape in the production of this blush, or white, wine. It was this enjoyment of the Blush Zinfandel wine that would keep some of the original plantings around to produce the deep, rich Zinfandel which was to become more popular later.

### **Regional Growing areas for Zinfandel Grapes**

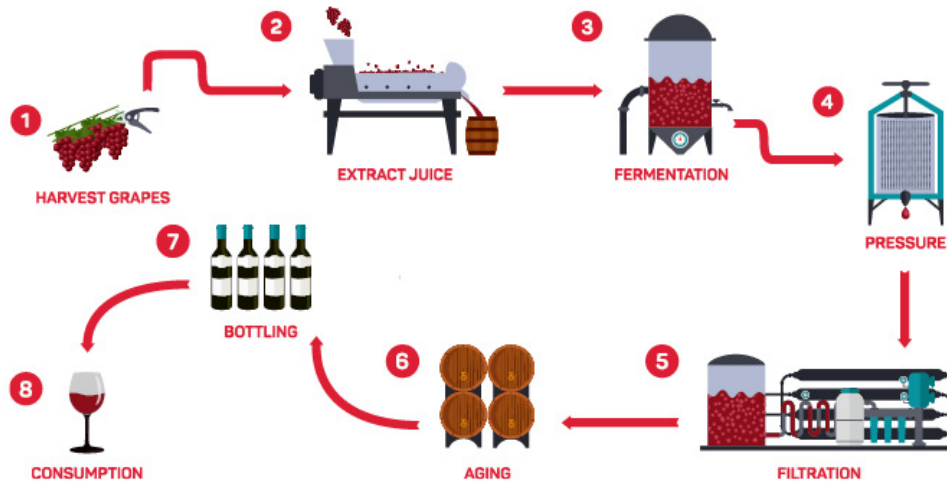
In 1999, the Zinfandel grape vines covered approximately 50,498 acres statewide. The city of Lodi, in the San Joaquin Valley, considers itself the headquarters for Zin. It boasts the oldest vines, which as we'll see later, are valued for their distinct flavor characteristics. It is also grown in San Luis Obispo, Napa, Sonoma, Monterey and Mendocino counties. By 2021, some of the vines had been replaced, perhaps by the most popular grown variety, Cabernet Sauvignon, leaving approximately 38,969 acres in Zin. Yet, even with that shrinkage, Zinfandel was the third largest grown red wine variety behind Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir.

Like most of you, I'm sure, I have been through all 50 of our states. And, it seems like I've seen grapes of many varieties growing in nearly every one. It's certainly not an overstatement to say that grapes are almost as prolific as weeds, but at least one variety or another seems able to accommodate to virtually any environment our country has to offer. There are, however, some climatic situations which benefit the Zinfandel grape far more than perhaps some other varieties. The Zinfandel grape seems to favor closeness to the coast or cool winters. But it also seems to excel in regions with hot summer days. Winters of cool tule fog in the Lodi region combined with cooler evenings and hot summers, seems to be very pleasing to the grape. This same environment is experienced in the Paso Robles area due to its proximity to the coast and extremely hot summers.

### **Unique characteristics of Zinfandel Grapes**

Perhaps one of the most telling things about Zinfandel grapes came from one of the earliest growers of the grape in the Paso Robles area. Gary Eberle was one of the first growers to grow and produce Zinfandel Wine in that region. Although he no longer grows Zinfandel grapes, he continues to make very acceptable Zinfandel wine. When I asked him why he had stopped growing the grape he responded, "I get very irritated because in a bunch of Zinfandel grapes there are often many berries which are still green, mixed in with those that have ripened". By purchasing grapes from other growers, he is able to select only the very best vineyards from which to source his grapes. His quick response helped encourage me to get several other grower's opinions both with regard to growing as well as with wine making. For the purpose of our study, I will be sharing thoughts from growers and enologists as presented in David Darlington's book, Angel

Visits, as well as interviews with the head wine maker, David Romag, at Tobin James Winery in Paso Robles, California and wine makers near Dubrovnik, Croatia. But, before I embark on further discussion, I believe a look at the basic steps in winemaking is helpful. This will become more apparent as I share thoughts about Zinfandel, in particular.



## THE WINE MAKING PROCESS

If you talk to two or three different wine makers and growers, you're likely to get two or three different opinions on subjects such as ideal growing conditions, problems unique to Zinfandel grapes, time on the vine before picking, production per acre, processing differences, and fermentation and aging time differences. I don't have time to discuss a variety of opinions, so I'll share comments from a conversation I had with the head wine maker for Tobin James Winery. Tobin James is clearly one of the most prolific Zinfandel wine producers in the Paso Robles central coast area. Probably most Zinfandel producers would agree with him that intense heat in the summer, followed by a 70 degree, or cooler evening, is ideal for Zinfandel grapes. In fact, one wine maker suggested that climate had more to do with the flavor of the grape than does the soil. As I already noted, the bunches of Zin grapes are a bit different than other varieties in that they can contain grapes which are still green, as well as fully ripened berries and several that have already turned to raisins. In order to attack the problem of green berries appearing in a bunch, Romag leaves the grapes on the vine as long as possible to be certain that all are either ripe or nearly so, resulting in their being picked with a very high sugar content. Since the grape is very sweet to begin with, after the yeast has done the job of changing the sugar into alcohol, the wine is usually sold at 14% to 15.5% alcohol content, resulting in a very strong wine. He also pointed out that he was less concerned with the presence of raisins in the bunch because they usually stayed with the stems as the bunches were de-stemmed. Other vintners suggested that the presence of some raisins gave additional flavor to the wine. In Croatia, the Crljenak Kastelanski grape now usually called Zinfandel, is picked

earlier than those in Paso Robles. This produces a wine with alcohol content most often at 13.5% or 14%. This was true in both the wineries we visited, as well as through label examinations at local grocery stores in the Dubrovnik area. Personally, I felt like our Zin had a richer taste than those I found at the two wineries we visited in Croatia: Korta Katerina Winery and Matusko Winery. And, we found that Plavic Mali, described by Croatians as “a child of the Crljenak Kastelanski grape” is now the favorite wine of Croatia.

In my interview with Romag, a lot of comparing occurred between the Zinfandel grape and the Cabernet Sauvignon grape. Bunch rot can be a larger problem with the Zin berries than with those of the Cab because the Cab berries have a much thicker skin than those of the Zin. This thinner skin can also account for the acquisition of more water than desired in the berries. It also means that the Zinfandel harvest is earlier, as already mentioned, than that of the Cabernet grapes due to their thicker, more protective, skins. He expects to produce up to 6 tons of Zin grapes per acre. But this is reduced when, as he suggests, thinning of bunches occurs early in the growth cycle to avoid over working the vine. The reduction usually results in his vineyards producing about the same number of tons as produced in an acre of Cab ...3.5 tons.

Romag pointed out the difference in fermentation between the two grapes. Fermentation for Zinfandel occurs between 10 and 14 days in oak. Because fermentation in oak is more limited with the Zin than the Cab, nitrogen is sometimes injected into the fermentation process to assist the yeast in the fermentation. Both are then aged in oak, but the aging for Zin is 12-15 months while that of the Cab is from 18-24 months. This accounts for the added tannins experienced in Cabernet Sauvignon wine. In Croatia the two wineries mentioned both indicated a longer fermentation process but agreed that the Zin was ready for drinking within the 12-15 months.

### **But the Proof is in the tasting!**

Those who prefer a more subtle and less fruit forward taste in wine will find Zinfandel less appealing. My attraction to it occurred because I found the usual words on bottles of Zin to be true and appealing to me. In short, most bottles will state that the wine is jammy and fruit forward with hints of raspberry, cherry, and spices, like pepper. Most vintners state that the wine is immediately ready for drinking, but would also be fine after 3-5 years of aging in the bottle.

But all research and tasting notes are not nearly as important as what you, the consumer, feel is tasty and appealing. So, if you enjoy a glass of wine and have not tried Zinfandel, why not give it try. I think you'll find it to be a unique and pleasant red wine which is truly a gift to our State from Croatia.

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