



**SONOMA COUNTY OLD VINE ZINFANDEL:
HISTORY IN A GLASS
May 2007 (condensed version)**

Contact: Larry Levine, larry.levine@sonomawinegrape.org, 707-522-5863

Old Vine Zinfandel is a Sonoma County treasure. The slants and slopes of angled mountainsides—where artistically twisted, arthritic-looking, gnarly vines were planted by pioneers fifty, eighty, and even more than 100 years ago—are now home to vines that stingily offer up fruit that is transmogrified into wines that are concentrated, intense, and identifiable.

These vines are survivors. When most vines are commercially viable for about 25 years, these old vines have lived through two battles with phylloxera, prohibition and several periods of consumer popularity fluctuations. Through it all, these vines and the wine made from them, truly reflect Sonoma County and the different AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) where they still thrive.

“Old vine Zinfandel should be preserved and honored as part of our past,” says **Dr. Jim Wolpert, University of California at Davis**. “They are a national treasure and should be treated with reverence like our old redwoods and oak trees.”

Dr. Wolpert has been studying old vine Zinfandels for more than 15 years and was instrumental in setting up the Oakville Experimental Vineyard that is owned and operated by the Department of Viticulture and Enology at University of California Davis. The 30-acre vineyard has more than 90 old vine Zinfandel samples from 57 vineyards located in 14 California counties from Mendocino to Riverside. Of the 57, 31 are from Sonoma County, says Dr. Wolpert. These vines are studied and each year a “Heritage Vineyard Wine” is made from the vines in association with Zinfandel Advocates & Producers (ZAP). The current 2004 release was made by **Kent Rosenblum** of Rosenblum Cellars, 2003 was made by Ridge’s **Paul Draper**.

“I love the heritage of old vine Zinfandel in Sonoma County, says Zinfandel specialist **Ondine Chattan**, winemaker at XYZin and formerly with Ridge and Cline. “The wines appeal to a wide range of consumers and are very food friendly and can be enjoyed with everything from pizza to fine cuisine.”

Joel Peterson states, “Old vine Zinfandel represents the most unique and traditional wine of California, and produce some of the best and intense wines when produced by top flight producers.” **Kent Rosenblum** believes that old vine Zinfandel is “the heart and soul of California wine.”

WHAT DOES “OLD VINE” MEAN?

- There is no legal definition of “Old Vine” Zinfandel

Joel Peterson, founder/winemaker of **Ravenswood**, defines them as the following:

- 0-10 years: young vines
- 10-50 years: middle age
- 50-80: old vines
- over 80 years: ancient

David Gates, vice president of vineyard management at **Ridge Vineyards** believes that old vines should be 50 years or older. Much of the Zinfandel fruit that is the base of most of Ridge Zinfandel wines is from vines that are pre-prohibition.

WHERE THEY GROW

Rhoda Smith of U.C. Davis believes that Sonoma County has the largest diversity of AVAs that have old vines. AVAs include Alexander Valley, Dry Creek, Russian River and Sonoma Valley.

“Sonoma County is the sweet spot in the world for Zinfandel,” says **David Gates**. “The soils and weather are perfect here—every year you always have interesting wines because it’s never too cold or warm.” Of the 14 Zinfandels that Ridge makes, all but three are from Sonoma County.”



Will Bucklin with Old Vine Zinfandel from the 1880s at his Old Hill Ranch in the Sonoma Valley.

HOW THEY GROW

- These vines are head-trained, spur-pruned, and once farmed by mule and by horse.

Jim Pedroncelli, owner/winemaker **Pedroncelli Winery**: “We have a small planting that goes back to 1904. Head-trained, spur-pruned on a steep hillside. My dad used to farm that patch with a horse. We’ve had to terrace that slope since the horse died! Of course, the soils there are thin, which helps to hold back the vine’s natural inclination toward vigor. That keeps crop levels down to as little as a ton an acre. With healthy vines—no misses—you might be able to get up to two tons per acre [as opposed to five to six tons off of fertile, flat land vines]. With more even ripening, fewer bunches and smaller berries, you get more color, more intensity in the wines. Which is a good thing.”

Lee Martinelli Sr., grower/winery owner: “**On Jackass Hill Vineyard**, which was planted in the late 1800s, we’re lucky when we get one ton, maybe a ton and a half per acre. That vineyard has a sixty percent slope—you have to stand on one row to pick the row above—and all of the farming has to be done by hand. Despite the name, my father and grandfather farmed it with a horse until the 1950s. My dad loved the challenge of farming that piece of land. For him,

it was another goal to achieve. My mother thought he was crazy, told him he was a jackass to try and farm so steep a piece of land. *That's* where the name came from! But you can see why it meant so much to him when you taste the wines, which are so layered, so concentrated. You open a bottle, and the next day it's still developing new flavors, new levels of interest."

Philip Coturri, veteran vineyard manager, **Enterprise Vineyards**: "There are four things that mark 'Old Vine Zinfandel' for me: No irrigation; eight-by-eight spacing, so the vines can be cross-plowed; St. George rootstock; the lost art of head pruning. When the vine gets past twenty or thirty years old, you start to see the natural reduction of crop load that results in wines of greater power and concentration. You don't see three tons per acre with Old Vines! And these ancient warriors—with rotted out trunks, where poison oak is growing, with broken limbs—they don't get Eutypa or other diseases. They're damn near indestructible."

PROPER FRUIT MATURITY IS IMPORTANT

- As with any vine, fruit maturity (full flavor development) is more important than mere sugar

Joel Peterson: "Fruit maturity is a *gestalt*. You start out looking at the vineyard as a whole. Are the vines healthy? Or are they on their last legs? What color are the leaves? Green? Yellow? Brown? What of the berries? Is there color continuity within the clusters? You look at the grapes, you taste the juice. Is the tannin harsh and green, or is it soft and mature? If the grapes taste like raspberry or cherry, if the taste is bright and warm, you've got it made. But if they're under ripe, harsh and green, or if they're overripe, rubbery and tasting like Port, you're in trouble. The chewiness of the seeds, too, is a factor. Mainly, if you've got that juicy, rosy character, you're in clover."



Kunde's Shaw Vineyards with Century Zinfandel Vines

WHAT ARE THE VALUES OF "OLD VINE" TO THE WINES?

- The resulting wines are all about intensity, concentration and weight
- Old vines seem to gain the benefit of their "experience," and ripen fruit more evenly with age

Ondine Chattan of XYZin is dedicated to exploring the vine in relationship to wine style. Her company makes 10, 50 and 100-year-old Zinfandels. In general, she has found that older isn't better but different and speaks to different occasions to enjoy the wines. According to her, the characteristics of older vines and how they translate to wine are:

- **10 years:** vital, perky, bright, viviant with youthful cherry and strawberry flavors and easy drinking.

- **50 years:** The crossroads, this is where there is the combination of older planting techniques with some field blends that are usually dry farmed. The spiciness (pepper) in the wine combines with the mature raspberry fruit.
- **100 years:** Vines only survived because families have kept them that long. Usually planted by relatives and nurtured by several generations. Planted generally in excellent locations with production of 1-2 tons per acre. The vines have fewer clusters and berries and show more spice and less pepper. The wines have incredible depth of color and show blackberry jam and cassis. Along with this concentrated fruit, the wines have the richness of the earth. Overall, these wines are the integration of the life cycle of the Zinfandel vine—the fruit, the spice and the depth of age.

WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT “OLD VINE” ZINFANDEL

- Zinfandel is something of “California’s own”

Jeff Kunde, head of sales and marketing at **Kunde Vineyard & Winery**: “Zinfandel is identified with California. It’s a real frontier grape. It helps that Zinfandel is ‘our’ grape, with its California traditions. There’s no such thing as Oregon Zinfandel, or New Zealand Zinfandel. Plus, we have vines that are over a hundred years old. Our ‘Century Vines’ Zinfandels were planted in 1882.” (For perspective: Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island* and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born that year.)

Rick Sayre, winemaker at **Rodney Strong Vineyards**: “The advantage of the older vines is that they were planted in the days before irrigation, and over the years the growers found just the right soil circumstances so that the vine could grow into an equilibrium that created almost perfect crop levels and fruit balance. We typically get about two tons per acre, three in a very good year.”

Sayre tells of an ongoing argument he has with the New Zealand vineyard guru, Dr. Richard Smart. “Smart comments that vine age doesn’t really matter, that you can get the same quality of fruit off of vines of any age,” says Sayre, the distrust evident in his voice. “I tell him that I’ve walked a lot of old vineyards in my time, and the vibrant spiciness—the black pepper, the sharp peppercorn that I *really* like—that you get off older vines just isn’t evident in the fruit from younger vines. All I have is the empirical evidence; I *know* what I taste.”

WHEN BEST TO DRINK THEM?

- When do you drink Zinfandel? Whenever you have the opportunity!

Joel Peterson: “Drinking aged wines is a personal thing. I was raised tasting mature French wines, so I like the complexity, the differences, the layering that you get out of older wines. If you like those complexities, those differences, then it’s worth it for you to put away your wines. But there are plenty of people who like their fruit up front and unencumbered with oak and age. That’s fine. There are wines enough for every taste.

“To me, a bottle is something of a time capsule, in which you get to watch a wine *change*. Take ‘better’ or ‘worse’ out of the equation. It’s change. Different. Interesting. I like what French oak does for our Zinfandel, so I age our vineyard designate Zinfandels a bit longer than most winemakers, usually sixteen to eighteen months. I know it frustrates Parker and the *Wine Spectator* tasters, who come out here in January and February, when everyone else has their wines in bottle . . . and we’re still in barrel!”

OLD VINE ZINFANDEL TIMELINE

(Based on information from *Zinfandel A History of a Grape and its Wine* by Charles L. Sullivan)

- In the 1830s “Zinfandel” was sold at a Long Island Nursery owned by William Robert Prince. George Gibbs had imported it to America from Croatia.
- It made its way to Boston and a leading nurseryman Charles M. Hovey was praising it as a table grape. Growing grapes in New England hot houses was very popular.
- In 1852 Frederick W. Macondray, a Massachusetts sea captain and a member of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, settled in California and imported a large collection of grapevines, including Zinfandel.
- Between 1852 and 1862 vineyards were being developed in California to produce wine for the California Gold Rush population. Winegrapes came from the East Coast and Europe.
- 1856 Buena Vista Winery became California’s first premium winery founded by Agoston Haraszthy (150 years ago this year).
- 1857 Sonoma Valley developed as a winegrape area with Haraszthy and Jacob Gundlach.
- 1860s: Zinfandel recognized for its high quality in Sonoma County and a flurry of plantings began. By 1879 almost 80 percent of new planting in the Alexander Valley/Healdsburg/Dry Creek Valley areas were Zinfandel.
- By 1889, a case of Zinfandel sold for \$5 wholesale.
- 1890s: Phylloxera hit and wiped out some of California’s best vineyards. St. George rootstock was resistant to Phylloxera and most of the Zinfandel was on this rootstock.
- In 1905, 7,080,000 gallons of Sonoma Zinfandel were made, compared with 119,000 from Alameda. In comparison, at that time, there was 4,224,000 gallons of Claret from Sonoma. Sonoma County was the leading California region then.
- 1900-1918: Zinfandel was blended and used as part of most wineries red wine “Clarets.”
- 1919-1933: Prohibition: Zinfandel was very popular with home winemakers and fresh grapes were shipped across the country to make wine.
- 1929: Zinfandel was considered the country’s most popular winegrape.
- December 5, 1933 repeal of Prohibition.
- In the years before World War II, most bottles labeled as Zinfandel were light-bodied and meant for immediate consumption.
- In the 1950s and 1960s table wine consumption grew and more wines were labeled by variety, including Zinfandel.
- In the 1960s, Americans shifted from sweet to dry wines and by 1966 more dry than sweet wine was consumed.
- 1969 Joe Swan in the Russian River Valley was making old vine Zinfandel along with Paul Draper at Ridge and David Bruce.
- 1970 Zinfandel wines were hot on the retail shelves in New York City and Washington, D.C.
- By the late 1970s, producers were beginning to see a decline in Zinfandel sales.
- 1972 Bob Trinchero at Sutter home started making “Oeil de Perdrix” with his over supply of Zinfandel. He later renamed it “White Zinfandel.”
- By 1988 Zinfandel was coming back to popularity and people were talking about the “R’s,” Rosenblum, Ravenswood, Ridge and Rafanelli as the big guns.
- 1992 Zinfandel Advocates and Producers (ZAP) is organized to promote Zinfandel and holds first tasting at Mandarin Hotel in San Francisco

- 1995-1996 James Wolpert, chair of the Department of Viticulture and Enology at UC Davis, begins the Heritage Vineyard for California Zinfandel at the Oakville Experiment Station. Its goal is the preservation of the genetics of Zinfandel's old vines from taking cuttings from old vines to preserve for future generations.
- 2001 DNA studies show that Zinfandel was originally from Croatia.
- At 2002 Zap tasting, 620 wines were poured and 94 producers were from Sonoma County followed by Napa County with 67 producers.
- At 2002 ZAP tasting a total of 37 wines claimed to be from old vines.
- 2007 Sonoma County old vine Zinfandels continue to thrive and at the ZAP tasting this January, more than 25 Sonoma County wineries had Old Vine Zinfandel listed or mentioned on the labels. Several top producers listed below don't put the term on their labels.

THE FUTURE

Ondine Chattan believes that “the viticultural heritage of Sonoma County is an integral part of the enjoyment and understanding of old vine Zinfandels. The romance of the age really touches the growers and they are less inclined to replant these vines for purely economic reasons.”

Kent Rosenblum comments “that it's our mission as Winemakers and Growers of remaining Old Vine Zinfandel to preserve this treasure for future generations. This, of course, requires that we take care of what we currently have planted, but that we also preserve the old vine budwood and promote new plantings utilizing that budwood on appropriate rootstock. The heritage vineyard is a great example of this. At Rosenblum we have actively promoted this concept. The Rockpile Road vineyard which was planted with budwood from select 120 year old vines located behind St. Peters Catholic Church is another very successful example.”

Joel Peterson states “Old Vine Zinfandel is recognized as a significant part of the history of winemaking in Sonoma County. Each year brings another year of age to these old vineyards, some of which have been sadly neglected. Renewed interest in these vines, improved quality of winemaking, and increasing prices for these special bottlings mean that these heritage vineyards will be preserved and well cared for in the future. The wines from these old vineyards will help Sonoma County define its regional wine character as we move to a more systematic understanding of how and where we grow grapes. With any luck, they will also fuel renewed interest in planting new Zinfandel vineyards with heritage selections, which will become the old vines of tomorrow.”

A SAMPLING OF WINES (recently available and sampled at the Jan. 27, 07 Zinfandel Associates & Producers Tasting in San Francisco). Information here was provided on the front and back labels.

1. **Acorn 2004 Heritage Vines Zinfandel, Alegria Vineyards, Russian River Valley**—Field Blend with some vines from 1890—78% Zinfandel, 10% Petite Sirah, and 10% Alicante Bouschet, 15% alch., \$32, acornwinery.com
2. **Alderbrook 2004 Dry Creek Valley Old Vine Zinfandel**, 14.5% alch., \$19, alderbrook.com
3. **Bucklin 2004 Old Hill Ranch Zinfandel (1864), Sonoma Valley**, 15.6% alch, 648 cases produced. \$34, buckzin.com
4. **Charter Oak Winery, Zinfandel 2005, Monte Rosa Vineyard**, 16% alch, 120-year-old-vineyards, 375 cases, charteroakwine.com

5. **Davis Family Vineyards 2005 Russian River Old Vine Zinfandel**. 14.5% alch.
6. **DeLoach 2004 Sonoma County Zinfandel “Forgotten Vines,”** 3 old vine vineyards—Salltone Ranch, Gambogi Ranch and Liebi Valley, deloachvineyards.com
7. **Dry Creek Vineyards Old Vine Zinfandel Sonoma County**, vineyards 80 years-old, plus. 13.5 alch. \$25, www.rycreekvineyardm
8. **Gamba Vineyards & Winery 2005 Old Vine Zinfandel**, for over century, Gamba family has farmed vineyards in Russian River Valley, 15.9 alch.
9. **The Heritage Vineyard 2004 Zinfandel by Ken Rosenblum**, from the UC Davis Oakville Heritage Vineyard, made for ZAP.
10. **Homefire 2005 Zinfandel, 53-year old Hale’s Vineyard in Dry Creek Valley**, 15.2%, homefirecellars.com
11. **Kunde 2003 Shaw Vineyard (1882) Old Vine Zinfandel**, \$30, kunde.com
12. **Limerick Lane Winery 2004 Old Vine Zinfandel, grown from 96-year-old estate vineyards**, will be available in September.
13. **Mantra 2005 Zinfandel, Old Vines Reserve, Alexander Valley** 15.9% alch. \$28.50, mantrawines.com
14. **Manzanita Creek 2004 Alfonso Old Vine Zinfandel, Russian River Valley**, 15.75 alch, \$25, manzanitacreek.com
15. **Mara 2005 Zinfandel, Russian River Valley, Dolinsek Ranch—1910 vineyard**, marawines.com
16. **Pedroncelli 2003 Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley, 2003 “mother Clone,”** farmed since 1927, \$14, pedroncelli.com
17. **Puccioni 2004 Old Vine Zinfandel, Sonoma County, Dry Creek Valley, 1904 vineyards**, 260 cases, 14.9% alch., \$28, puccionivineyards.com
18. **Ravenswood Zinfandel, 2005, Oak Hill Vineyard Barrel Sample**, \$60, ravenswood-wine.com
19. **Trentadue Winery “Old Patch Red,” 2004 Sonoma County Red Wine, screw top**, 76% Zin, 16% Petite Sirah and 8% Carignane. “Named after the original field blend of our century old vines.” 14.9% alch, \$14, trentadue.com
20. **Sapphire Hill Winery, 2005 Sapphire Hill Winery Winberrie Vineyard, Russian River Valley (at least 1905)**, sapphirehill.com
21. **Sapphire Hill Winery 2004 Bastoni Vineyard, Sonoma County**, sapphirehill.com
22. **Seghesio Family Vineyards, 2005 Old Vine, Sonoma County**, 15.3 alch., \$33, seghesio.com
23. **Starry Night 2004 Old Vine Zinfandel, Tom Feeney Ranch (from mid-1940s)** 14.8% alch., \$28, starrynightwinery.com
24. **St. Francis 2004 Wild Oak Old Vines Zinfandel, Sonoma Valley**, “first vintage of wine named after vineyard where winery is located.” 15.3% alch, stfranciswinery.com
25. **Sunset Vineyards 2002 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel, 50% 90-year-old vines; 50% 43-year-old vines;** 15.2% alch. Sunset Cellars, Alameda, CA, \$23, sunsetcellars.com
26. **Winery, XYZin 10, XYZin 50 and XYZin 100**, xyzinwine.com

Additional Sonoma County Old Vine Zinfandel Wines Available

1. **Ravenswood**
 - Ravenswood 2002 Monte Rosso Vineyard Zinfandel, \$32
 - Ravenswood 2003 Barricia Zinfandel, \$32
2. **Rosenblum**
 - Rosenblum 2005 Monte Rosso Reserve Zinfandel, Sonoma County, \$45
 - Rosenblum 2004 St. Peter’s Church Reserve Zinfandel, Sonoma County, \$55

3. Ridge

- Ridge 2005 Sonoma County Three Valleys Zinfandel, \$20
- Ridge 2005 Ponzio Vineyards (Russian River) \$26
- Ridge 2005 Lytton Springs (Dry Creek) \$33
- Ridge 2004 Geyserville (Alexander Valley) \$33

4. Hartford Family Winery

- Hartford 2005 Russian River Valley Zinfandel, \$30
- Hartford 2005 Fanucchi-Wood Road Vineyard, Russian River Valley Zinfandel, \$50
- Hartford Vineyard 2005 Russian River Valley Zinfandel, contact winery
- Hartford 2005 Highwire Vineyards, Russian River Valley Zinfandel, \$50
- Hartford 2004 Dina's Vineyard, Russian River Valley Zinfandel, \$45
- Hartford 2005 Jolene's Vineyard, Russian River Valley Zinfandel, \$45

5. Sausal Vineyard & Winery

- Sausal 2003 "Family" Estate Alexander Valley Zinfandel (50-60 years), \$18
- Sausal 2004 Private Reserve Estate Alexander Valley Zinfandel (80-90 years) \$23
- Sausal 2004 Century Vine Estate Alexander Valley Zinfandel, (130 years) \$65
- Sausal 2004 Century Zinfandel Magnum, \$65

6. Dashe 2003 Luvau Vineyards Old Vine Dry Creek Zinfandel, \$23.49

7. Fanucchi 2001 Old Vine Russian River Zinfandel, \$45, 2002--\$50.