

2003 OLD VINE ZINFANDEL

Sonoma County

— by Mary Ewing-Mulligan —

“**O**ver the years, I’ve had a love-hate relationship with Zinfandel. Loved it until about the mid-1980s, back when many of the best Zins were lean and concentrated. Hated the super-ripe, exaggerated fruit versions that many people exalted in the 1990’s. Here again in this offering from Dry Creek is a Zinfandel that I love—and maybe one that those who enjoy extreme Zin can love, too.

Besides pioneering Sauvignon Blanc in California, the family-owned Dry Creek Vineyard winery has long been a specialist in Zinfandel. Although the Dry Creek Valley appellation—which most Dry Creek Vineyard wines carry—is famous for its Zins, this particular wine comes from vineyards throughout the larger Sonoma County area, from vines that are eighty-plus years old. The vine age, with the low yields that it implies, is surely part of the reason that this wine has so much character. In fact, when I came back to this wine after sampling some impressive Priorats (old-vine Spanish reds famous for their concentration of flavor), the Zin held its own, despite the challenging context.

The aroma of this wine is very Zinfandel, brimming with ripe red berry fruit and spice, with herbal nuances such as mint, all of this aroma very concentrated and almost tangy in its lively freshness. In the mouth the wine is totally dry and quite full-bodied, with firm, fine-grained tannin and dense, concentrated flavors of dark fruits, red berries, earthiness and spice. Its texture is soft but the wine is no floozy; its tannin keeps the structure clean, lean and controlled, despite the denseness and richness of flavor. The effect is as if the wine is almost bursting at its seams, but those seams—the firm tannins—are so strong that the flavor cannot burst them.

If you like more flamboyant Zins, drink this wine from a very large glass, which stretches out the tannic structure and lets the wine’s ripeness show through. Or let it age for 3 years, to soften the wine a bit. If your taste in Zinfandel runs similar to mine, however, drink it in a medium Bordeaux-shaped glass, and drink it younger rather than older. Either way, have it with meat: ribs (provided the sauce is not sweet), hanger steak, a rare rib-eye, or grilled sausages. For vegetarians, a meatless chili can do it justice, as could a hunk of Parmigiano and a grilled portobella mushroom.”

