



Thomas Cottrell is Bellevue Club's wine consultant and the owner of La Cantina Wine Merchants.

SUMMER AND ZINFANDEL

Now that it's July, we're officially in summer, Seattle style. In Seattle, summer begins on July 5. Personally, I think that's a bit early. My observations over the years place the beginning of summer around July 15. But who's counting?

We all are, of course. We're waiting for, among other things, the weather to be nice enough to be able to barbecue a steak or a frankfurter without having to wear a down vest or carry an umbrella.

Once that moment arrives, we can turn our attention to choosing the right wine for the summer barbecue season.

If you're reading this on or before Independence Day, let me recommend you select that most all-American of wines, Zinfandel, in honor of the celebration. (Let me recommend it even if it's the end of the month). If the skies are overcast or dripping, you're probably going to barbecue something anyway and few wines harmonize so well with grilled fare as Zin does.

Not the pink stuff, mind you, even though more white Zinfandel is sold nationally than the original, full-blooded red kind these days. You want the original, hearty, sometimes

rustic red that's been the mainstay of the California wine industry—and of home winemakers—for generations. That's the real reason I call it all-American, not because it's a native North American grape variety.

Like most Americans and most wine grapes in this country, its roots are in Europe. (Get it? Roots, grapes ... I couldn't resist; forgive me.) We just don't know from where.

There are plenty of theories. Not too long ago the primitivo grape of southern Italy was given credit. More recently an unpronounceable variety from Eastern Europe was identified as the genetic precursor of Zin. Yet none of these look exactly like our California classic, and they certainly don't taste anything like Dancing Bull, Ravenswood, Ridge or any of the famous California examples. That makes them unique and uniquely American. And it explains why I also call for Zinfandel to be served at Thanksgiving and all other national holidays—it's our wine and ours alone.

But which do you choose? To my way of thinking, the emphasis of great Zin is bold flavors paired with seductive style—tough, tannic or reserved wines need not apply. There's plenty to choose from, but the following are personal favorites.

2002 Four Vines Biker Zinfandel *Paso Robles, \$14*

This smaller winery turns out a fine array of wines, but their Zin may be my favorite. It's full of soft, ripe fruit, emphasizing berries and plums; it's rich and long—and so easy to enjoy.

2002 Geyserville Zinfandel *Sonoma County, \$32*

Ridge Winery, located south of the San Francisco Bay, was perhaps the first winery to elevate Zin from jug-wine status back in the 1960s. They still are arguably in the forefront of the Zinfandel world. I can't remember the last time I had a Ridge Zin I didn't like; perhaps that's why they're among the most expensive examples out there. Among the many cuvees they turn out, the Geyserville is a candidate for the best and goes a long way towards proving my point: dark, rich, complex and heady from the addition of Carignane and Petit Sirah, it's lip-smacking good, but highly allocated.

2002 Trinitas Old Vine Zinfandel *Contra Costa County, \$16*

The Cline family emphasizes Rhône varieties with the large number of value-priced wines they turn out under that name, but their Zin is consistently good too. Even better is their upscale version, the 2002 Trinitas "Old Vine." It shows this by combining very old vineyard fruit with a touch of Petite Sirah and Mataro (the Spanish name for Mourvedre). The result is impressive indeed, in no small part because Contra Costa is a great district for Zin—keep an eye out for other wines from this district.

2001 Rancho Zabaco Stefani Vineyard Zinfandel *Dry Creek Valley, \$17*

Rancho Zabaco is another consistently fine producer of Zinfandel; don't let the fact that it's a Gallo product scare you off. Their least expensive version, the Dancing Bull, is a personal favorite, full of zesty fruit flavors and a disarming drinkability. I've been known to order it by the glass in more than one restaurant—forget that it's in every grocery store in the land. But for a special treat try one of their single vineyard bottlings, like the 2001 Rancho Zabaco "Stefani Vineyard." It's more elegant and sophisticated, yet the complexity and length will definitely impress, if you can find it on the shelf.

With these wines the fireworks are in the glass, but don't let that stop you from setting off a sparkler or two, with a glass of Zin in hand.