



California Central Coast Wine Tour

Class VI – Zinfandel

On the last leg of our tour through California’s Central Coast, we learned more about one of the most popular wines in California – Zinfandel. Known as a “California Heritage” grape, Zinfandel can be made into many styles of wine, and Zinfandel is widely grown throughout the entire state, including on the Central Coast. We visited three vineyards that are known for their Zinfandel: Tobin James Cellars, Norman Vineyards, and Calcareous Vineyard.

Tobin James Cellars

At this well-known winery, we met several members of the Tobin James gang, considered to be the “naughty boys of Paso Robles.” Tobin James sat down with us first and told us a bit about why he likes Zinfandel. “It has the most personality of any grape that we make wine out of,” he claimed. “You can have a real light raspberry wine, or you can have a heavy pruny wine, or you can mix the two together to make a real nice balance.” Tobin, known to friends as Toby, enjoys the foxiness of Zinfandel, and even though he’s never tasted a briar patch, notes that Zinfandel can have a briar patch flavor. “We mostly just like to say it,” he admitted.

We then spoke to Claire Silver, co-owner and operations manager, who poured Zinfandel behind the bar in the western style tasting room. Ben Lunt, the tasting room manager, also joined us to demonstrate how to go about tasting Zinfandel. Claire looked on as Ben identified the aromas in Zinfandel – raspberry, cherry, black cracked pepper. Then Claire explained the winemaking philosophy at Tobin James, which involves sourcing grapes from dozens of vineyards to create the best possible wine. Claire compared this method to cooking – by using grapes from a variety of vineyards, Tobin James has the ingredients to make many styles of wine.

Next, we headed outside with Toby to talk about his favorite food pairing for Zinfandel. Toby loves a Margherita pizza, with cheese, basil and tomato, and thinks that when it comes to pairing food with Zinfandel, it doesn’t get any better than that. “At Tobin James, there are three things that make wine,” he said. “Beer, pizza and country music.”

At the end of our visit, we reviewed the differences between Red and White Zinfandel. Even though the two wines are made from the same grape, they are in fact very different. We also reviewed the word terroir, which is an all-encompassing term

that refers to the climate, geography, soil and everything that naturally affects the way grapes grow. Finally, we got a glimpse of the bottling line at Tobin James, a streamlined and efficient operation. Toby grabbed a bottle and told us that he hoped we'd enjoy the wine. "Hopefully everyone's going to like it, I think they will," he said. "I like it, and I don't even like wine...it gives me gas!" With that information in mind, we waved goodbye and headed toward our next stop.

Norman Vineyards

Norman Vineyards, located on the west side of Paso Robles, is known for its many styles of Zinfandel. The winery was founded by Art and Lei Norman, and today their son Jim Norman continues the family tradition at the winery. We began our visit by talking to Steve Felten, who has been the winemaker at Norman Vineyards for the past three years.

Steve listed some of the characteristics of Zinfandel, including spicy flavors like fennel and pepper, as well as the more common berry, chocolate and coffee flavors. "What I like best about Zinfandel," he told us, "is the long, velvety smooth finish." Steve explained that they make their Zinfandel from some of the oldest vineyards in Paso Robles, including a vineyard that was planted before Prohibition in 1910. Steve enjoys Zinfandel with BBQ spare ribs, spicy lamb dishes and even chocolate desserts. "The bright raspberry and cherry aromas in the Zinfandel go very well with chocolate cake or chocolate mousse," he told us. Steve also let us know that Zinfandel doesn't tend to age as well as other red wines. He explained that it has a very distinct varietal characteristic that doesn't necessarily change with time.

Zinfandel is a versatile grape, and Steve explained how they make White Zinfandel at Norman Vineyards. In White Zinfandel production, the juice is immediately separated from the grape skins and is fermented only in stainless steel. The White Zinfandel at Norman, says Steve, has excellent aromas of cherry, strawberry and mint. Meanwhile, the production process for Red Zinfandel is a bit more complex. In this process, the grapes are gently crushed before going into a tank for a three to four day fermentation. After extracting the flavor and color from the skins, the grapes are pressed and the wine goes into the barrel for a 18-24 month aging process. Steve likes to use American oak barrels - he told us that American oak from Minnesota imparts delicious smoky and toasty flavors on the Zinfandel.

At the end of our visit, we had a chance to catch up with Jim Norman, who told us a bit more about his father, Art Norman. Art began making Zinfandel before the varietal gained its current popular status – one could say that he was a pioneer in the Zinfandel trade. During this time, he became known as 'Captain Zinfandel' and sometimes wore a cape to show it. "My father excelled in everything he did," said Jim. "Everything we do here is in his legacy."

Calcareous Vineyard

Calcareous Vineyard is a new winery, located at the top of a hill on the west side of Paso Robles. The location was a beautiful setting for ending our Central Coast wine tour, and we had the pleasure to speak with winemaker Justin Kahler about Zinfandel and general wine tasting. Justin described Zinfandel grapes to us – they are generally large in size and grow in large clusters. He acknowledged that there are many styles of Zinfandel, but told us that at Calcareous, they only make a traditional, dry Red Zinfandel. This wine, Justin told us, has a dark purple color, with aromas of chocolate and blueberries, and flavors of raspberry, white pepper, and spice. He told us that aging Zinfandel in oak adds dark, earthy and peppery tones to Zinfandel, and that a style with less oak influence would have fruitier flavors. At Calcareous, the Zinfandel is usually aged in Hungarian and American barrels for 12-18 months, depending on whether it's a reserve or estate wine.

We spoke to Kevin Mclaughlin, the general manager, about pairing wine with food. Kevin has extensive experience in the food industry, and told us that he likes to pair jammy Zinfandel with pork dishes, duck or steak. It also works well with spicy or peppery dishes, like steak with peppercorn sauce.

After a tour of the winery, Justin sat down with us for one last review of tasting techniques. Leading us through the process, Justin had some good tips on how to really appreciate wine during a tasting. To begin, we should smell a wine and think about the aromas we are experiencing. As we swirl the wine, we should examine the color, then smell the wine again to see if any new aromas have been released. Next, we should taste the wine. By swirling it around in our mouths, we can begin to sense all of the components of the wine – astringency, sweetness, and acidity. Justin explained that it's a good idea to ask ourselves questions: Is it fruity? Is it dry? Is it tart? Is it savory? He assured us that as we gain more experience wine tasting, we'll be able to identify more and more – we'll learn to pick out vanilla tones from barrels, and even identify different wines by their tannin structures!

Our visit at Calcareous ended at the top of the property, where we looked down over the vineyard and valley below. Here, Justin explained the definition of the word "calcareous" which refers to soil that is rich in limestone. Looking over the vineyard, it was clear why they chose the name Calcareous Vineyard. The rocky, white soil helps produce wonderful grapes, and it is common not only at Calcareous Vineyard, but throughout Paso Robles. After one last sip of Zinfandel, we bid farewell to Calcareous Vineyard and the beautiful Central Coast. We tasted wonderful wines and met wonderful people along our journey, and learned that when it comes to amazing wine tasting in California, the diversity of the Central Coast can't be beat.

Fun Facts about Zinfandel:

For most of the 20th century, Zinfandel was the most widely planted red wine grape in California.

Zinfandel grapes originally came from Croatia and were brought to America in the early 1800s.

In San Luis Obispo County, there are over 2,000 acres of Zinfandel vineyards.

There are over 50,000 acres of Zinfandel planted in the state of California.

Many Zinfandel vineyards are head pruned, a practice that became popular during the Gold Rush, since the growing method requires no special equipment like wire or wood.