

# WINE

## This red grape thrives in California and southern Italy – which means it's suited to Australia, too.

The origins of zinfandel, a long-time speciality of California's winegrowers and a full-throttle red with an international cult following, have long been shrouded in mystery. For decades winegrowers and ampelographers (vine identification specialists) had postulated a relationship with Italy's primitivo, which looks and grows very much like zinfandel, and thrives in the warm, dry southern region of Puglia, especially around the Salento in the heel of Italy's boot.

It was only in December 2001 that the connection was finally confirmed through DNA profiling. Both zinfandel and primitivo share their lineage with a Croatian grape variety called crljenak kasteljanski.

The heartland of old-vine zinfandel is the Dry Creek Valley of California, and wines from the region are highly sought after by wine aficionados stateside. It has not been especially cherished by winemakers or drinkers in Australia, though, and the one zinfandel-based wine with a cult following is that of Cape Mentelle from Margaret River.

It was while he was studying and working in California that Cape Mentelle founder David Hohnen caught the zinfandel bug, aided in no small part by a long-time friend of his, Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards. Ridge's Lytton Springs and Geyserville are both considered classic zinfandel-based wines.

But there's been a surge in interest in zinfandel of late and an increasing number of interpretations can be found from regions as diverse as the Barossa and Adelaide Hills in South Australia, Mudgee and Hilltops in New South Wales, and even Geelong.

One producer making an increasingly good, and powerfully clenched, fist of it is Kangarilla Road in McLaren Vale. Kangarilla Road's latest releases, a 2006 primitivo and 2006 Black St Peters zinfandel tip the scales at 16 per cent and 15.5 per cent alcohol respectively. Yet both hold the alcohol remarkably well: in fact they thrive on it.

"Zinfandel keeps its primary flavours longer as the berries ripen," explains owner Kevin O'Brien, although at the same time managing to hold onto what he describes as "savouriness". This, according to O'Brien, is in stark contrast to shiraz, "where the flavours get more jammy the longer they're left on the vine."

Another remarkable thing about the variety is its root system, which is among the largest of any vinifera grape variety. As a result, it is incredibly drought resistant. As O'Brien puts it: "We give ours a drink only when there's an extreme, extended period of heat." And he adds: "It makes sense that it's survived all this time in a place such as Puglia, when you look at the climate and the soils. It has adapted well to that sort of climate over thousands of years." So given our water shortage, it's no surprise that there's been increased local interest in zinfandel-primitivo and, for that matter, other southern Italian reds such as nero d'avola, aglianico and negroamaro.

O'Brien believes that the variety could find more acceptance in Australia under the more fashionable Italian name of primitivo, and has already seen this translate into sales since re-badging his entry-level zinfandel as primitivo.

And while the contraction "prim" hasn't got quite the same sexy resonance as zin, and doesn't even hint at the mouthful of flavour you'll encounter, at least we don't have to get our tongues around crljenak kasteljanski.



**Cape Mentelle Zinfandel 2005** Margaret River, WA, \$51 (Boccaccio Cellars)

Deep, dark raisin fruit smells, plus wholemeal biscuit and sweet roast meats. Smells sweet-savoury. Attacks crisp and redcurrant mineral, building fruitcake and serious tannins across the palate. Mouth aromas of dried fig and reduced coal dust. This is superb.



**Chalmers Aglianico 2005** Murray Darling, NSW, \$28 (Prince Wine Store)

Cedary, blueberry muffin smelling – interesting nose this – almost celery salt. Quite tangy in the mouth with a celery and orange peel edginess contrasting richer dried fruit flavours. Firm, dusty tannins and a citrusy tang to close make for a lipsmacking red.



**Kangarilla Road Primitivo 2006** Fleurieu, SA, \$22 (Randall the Wine Merchant)

Lots of baked prune and shrivelled glace pear. Some toffee too. Mouth-flooding, rich, prune fruit, with some marshmallow, but tight, tannin mineral tastes balance the fruit sweetness. Some alcohol warmth at the back, which fits well.



**Ridge Vineyards Lytton Springs 2005** Dry Creek Valley, California, USA, \$70 (Vintage Cellars city)

Stewed bramble prune smelling, with some wheatiness and sniffs of oyster sauce and soy. It smells sapid as well as sweet fruited. Lots of dark prune flavours, yet still full of sparkle. Old-vine zin at its finest.