

US ZINFANDEL, PETITE SIRAH & FRIENDS

Zin in the Land of Cabernet

An Interview with Storybook Mountain's Jerry Seps

by Joshua Greene • August 2, 2022

Jerry Seps was taking a break from a hot July afternoon, catching up on paperwork while his Bernese Mountain Dog stretched out in the corner. I commented on the size of her feet when she walked over to greet me. "They're bred to be up in the snow," Seps explained, "to take milk to market for farmers in the countryside. They have broad shoulders, and the breeder said she had the largest feet of any of the females. She weighs 120 pounds and, sometimes, she wants to be a lapdog—I try to discourage that." Ellie headed back to the corner of the office, and Seps and I sat down to talk about selling zinfandel in Napa Valley. —Joshua Greene

W&S: You seem to have found a way to sell zinfandel here. You've survived.

JS: We have survived. It's been work, both as a grower and seller of wine. Selling zinfandel in a cabernet valley is a mixed blessing.

W&S: Do you think of yourself differently in those two different roles? Do you go into a selling mode versus a growing mode? When I think of Jerry Seps, I think of spending time with you in the vineyard. I don't think of you in a selling mode.

JS: I try to bring what I do in the vineyard, and the uniqueness of the site, into my selling presentation. That's the first thing I bring into a presentation. The vineyard kind of goes with me. I talk about it.

One of the virtues with zinfandel is there is not a European standard for quality. And that gives a grower immense leeway to create and you can create anything from something that's immediately drinkable to something more ageable, like our wines. It also allows you to work with your site; if you think it's good for zinfandel, you can work with that site and it gives you freedom, because you don't have to follow a model, it doesn't have to be Château Margaux.

W&S: That's interesting that there isn't really a corollary. In Croatia, there isn't a corollary; in Puglia, there isn't a corollary. It's not Napa Valley or Sonoma County zin. Those primitivos and Tribidragos are different.

JS: That's the thing about zinfandel. Our zinfandel is different from Lodi zinfandel. Lots of people like Lodi zinfandel, fine.



Jerry Seps

W&S: So how do you define what you want to accomplish with your wine, if you don't have a lodestar out there, "I want to be a Bordeaux, I'm going to make a cabernet that's going to beat Bordeaux." What is your lodestar?

JS: It's a wine that carries all the way through. You pick up the glass and you pick up aromas; it whets your palate to get a taste of that wine. When you taste the wine, the aromas are converted to flavors and the flavors then are converted to a lasting sensation as you swallow the wine. It's that linear continuity that I think great wines can have.

W&S: So, you have an ideal for a great wine but you don't associate your wine with any other particular great wine; you associate it with what you appreciate about great wine.

JS: I am happy to drink anything, or nearly anything. But I'm looking for those qualities. That's why I'm a bit effusive about Wine & Spirits. You are in the same mode. You don't care, necessarily, that it's zinfandel.

W&S: No, the variety is the least interesting aspect of the wine to me. The place where it's from is the most interesting aspect of the wine to me and then how it expresses that and then the variety is an aspect of that but it's the least interesting aspect of that, the most malleable aspect of it.

JS: It is. And it's kind of strange. Is it ironic or is it the way it should be that the people who came here before 1976 planted zinfandel more often, whereas, after '76, it was all cabernet. I don't know if it was an accident, or if it had a lot to do with money.

W&S: The valley was a lot of prunes and zin. I don't think it was an accident at all, zin and petite sirah, chenin and riesling. Zin in my experience, expresses Napa Valley in a more interesting way than a lot of cabernets do. Yes, there are great cabernets from Napa Valley, but they tend to be more blunt and aggressive. Great zin in this valley, and there are only certain places that grow great zins in this valley...

JS: That's one thing about cabernet, you can grow that in more places than you can grow zinfandel. If you look at where zinfandel is from, it's an area that has a coastal climate. Croatia is a fairly hilly area, you're not going to have big, flat valleys. It's just a grape that tends to do better when it has to struggle a little bit, rather than get eight, ten tons per acre. Yields are important, but they are not necessarily crucial. Some parts of our vineyard might get three tons, some might get one and a half; it doesn't mean the one-and-a-half is better than the three-ton area, necessarily.

W&S: Is three tons the upper limit of what you would get from an acre?

JS: It's very much soil dependent. Sometimes we have these little swales where the soil has accumulated and nutrients have accumulated. We might get three, three and a half tons there. Mostly, off the hills, our yields are two tons. The vines are

planted eight to nine hundred an acre, and the density does vary. We continue to experiment to see if something else is better.

W&S: Another aspect is vine age.

JS: I have a real problem with that argument, that old-vine zinfandel is supposed to be something special. We have vineyards now that are 45 years old. We have vineyards that are 12 years old. 45-year-old vines are yielding a wine that's not necessarily any better than the 12 year old vines'.

W&S: And in terms of ageability from those vines, are you able to track that, to see if that wine from the 12-year-old vine can age as long as the wine from the 45-year-old?

JS: I do track what goes into our reserve; I think it has as much to do with clone and rootstock, and place in the vineyard as it does with age of the vine.

W&S: So that wine from the 1980s that David Darlington and you and I tasted...Wolfgang Weber was with us as well.

JS: It was on AXR, it was clone 1A.

W&S: And how old were those vines when that wine was made?

JS: Well, the 1981 that you liked was on three-year-old vines. And in the Judgement of Paris, the wine from three-year-old vines won in the group. My argument is, the advantage of older vines is that they do produce good wine if they are in the right location. And their yield is kind of self-limiting; you're not going to get old vines producing six, ten, twelve tons an acre. If you're a good grower, you can pick the right site. You can regulate crop. You can achieve the same thing that an older vine can achieve. We pull some older vineyards and we'll pull a vineyard that's only been in for six years if it's not going according to our standards.

W&S: And those standards are based on your tasting the wine at blending time and saying this block is not performing at the level we want?

JS: Or that block all ends up in one of the wines that we don't think is one of the special wines. We will say, "What's wrong with that block?" Does it need more fertilization? Does it need different kind of training? If those come back negative then we'll pull it.

W&S: So, how long does that investigation take? Is that a five-year investigation? A three-year investigation?

JS: I think it's five or six years. Sometimes, if there's disease in that block, if we see disease we shorten the tests for the vines not behaving properly and can pull a vineyard younger. But, generally, it takes a while to see [what might work].

W&S: Napa Valley has become this tourist-driven destination and that gestalt is very much tied into cabernet and the sale of very polished cabernet—these wines that are very smooth, heavily oaked, very fruity and very expensive. And, for a zinfandel, your wine is not cheap.

JS: No, it is not. I know that. Given our small production, we have to stand out. It means a couple of things. The quality of the wine, obviously. People are price aware. If you're selling at \$15.99 versus \$35.99, they are going to think the \$35.99 wine

is better. So, we try to price with the other premiums; we watch what Ridge does, for instance. But I'm not in this business to get rich.

W&S: Well, if you were, you'd rip all this out and plant cabernet.

JS: When we make more money, I can raise my field workers' wages, make my family happier that way, just make ourselves more stable, have a good banking relationship because I'm always a little bit profitable. All those things are really important to stay in business. That's why we're still around after 46 years.

One of the reasons we have a lot of visitors is because we do stand apart. This year is probably our best year for visitors. We're hosting them in the redwood grove, because of COVID. People like it. They stay longer, it seems, but they are buying wine, so that's all right. It turned out that the writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* took a liking to one of our wines. The rosé, as a matter of fact. She said, "This wine is really different, and it's really tasty. And it's darker, much darker than any other rosé. That's because it has more flavor, there's more going on in this wine. It's not just insipid pink stuff." Anyway, she came up and visited, and I wasn't here; Colleen gave her the tour. She hadn't been here prior to writing up the rosé. On top of that, she listed us as one of the 25 places to visit in the wine country, with the signature line, "If you want to see what Napa Valley was like 40 years ago, go to Storybook Mountain." So, that's really helped. Occasionally, having that niche works out.

W&S: So, if you were coming into this business today, and you had the opportunity to plant either cabernet or zinfandel at this vineyard, which would you do?

JS: If I could afford it, I would do zinfandel again. Or, I might do touriga nacional. We have a little bit of that starting. The climate is changing; it is getting warmer, and I think the hottest areas of my vineyard aren't always the best areas for zinfandel. I like the cool, the fog that comes in; I like the breezes that blow over the mountain. I like the eastern exposures. All those things are important. As you said, for the zins, when we did that zinfandel tasting at the house, you said, there must be something in common, they all have northeastern exposures.

W&S: I'm fascinated by this particular site for zin, because it has a very strong presence. This is one of the more distinctive California wines that I taste. Your wines have a very particular character that I associate with Napa Valley but I don't associate with cabernet.

JS: You're not the first to indicate that. I used to taste quite a bit with Robert Parker. I used to organize his zinfandel tastings and the two of us used to taste together. He said, "I can always pick out your wines, they are distinctive." He didn't always accord them very high scores. But what he wrote about the wines was always complimentary. But we weren't getting 95s from Parker, they weren't Parker wines.

W&S: But he did like Napa Valley zin—he just preferred what was the Turley style at that time.

JS: Correct. As for the other part of your question, having a quality zinfandel in the Napa Valley makes it a little easier to sell to restaurants. We probably have more restaurant placements here in the Napa Valley than any other wine. If you want zinfandel, normally you're going to look to us. Being a cabernet valley, in that sense, it's a little advantageous from a marketing position. One time, we had seven or eight restaurants pouring our wine by the glass here in the Valley.

JS: It used to be in San Francisco; it's gotten tougher. We lost a lot of placements when COVID came, and they are very difficult to gain back. Partly it's a phenomenon of a different attitude on the part of young somms in particular. They want to make their own statement. They are not as willing to sit down with you and taste your wines.

And I am spoiled, because I started selling wine in the eighties. I'd go into the best restaurants in San Francisco and they would, at least, hear me out. Maybe it didn't work with their program. Maybe it was not a style they felt went with their food. But they would hear me out. I don't like dropping bottles. We've been selling wine for forty years; we don't drop bottles. When the White House wanted wine from us, they came out and tasted here; I didn't send them bottles.

I think if you are going to be an effective somm, you need a little background. If I go as a person, you're going to get some of the background. If the wine is corked, I can tell you that and try to find another bottle for you. Not that I am so personable, but I think it represents the winery better to have the person.

I think there are two things going on that perhaps were not going on. They don't want to be influenced by personal contact. Objectivity is the best of all worlds. The other thing is that many somms now have assistant manager positions, in effect; time is really a problem. And the world of wine has expanded, greatly. So they feel it's necessary to learn about the latest wine from Greece or Turkey, and that takes time. It leaves less time for personal interaction with people. I have to sell wine, so I'm trying to understand where they are coming from.



Joshua Greene

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