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Zinfandel Elegance

The outstanding 2009 vintage yields wines of balance and finesse

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The clouds over The Russian River Valley were dark and moody just after dawn. It was early October of 2009, and pickers at Papera Ranch were literally running through the vineyard as Carlisle winemaker Mike Officer watched the sky. A massive storm was headed toward Sonoma, and thin-skinned Zinfandel hates to get wet late in the season.

In an effort to dodge that last-minute deluge, Golden State Zinfandel producers like Officer may have created some of their best wines in years. Thanks as well to the long, cool growing season that preceded the harvest, the 2009s show elegance and focus, typically offering modest alcohol levels without sacrificing fresh, vivid fruit. Overall, I rate the vintage an outstanding 92 points (on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale) for both Napa and Sonoma.

Since my previous report on the category ("Reversal of Fortune," June 30, 2011), I have reviewed nearly 450 California Zinfandels in blind tastings in our Napa office, including more than 275 from 2009 and another 70 from 2010. Nearly 125, or a remarkable 28 percent, earned outstanding scores of 90 points or higher. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

Two wines represent the cream of the crop among new releases. The Seghesio Zinfandel Alexander Valley Home Ranch 2009 (95 points, \$38) is a complete package, rich and ripe yet beautifully structured, with huckleberry and smoky cracked pepper notes. The Turley Zinfandel Paso Robles Ueberroth Vineyard 2009 (95, \$48) is also a knockout, showing power, depth and finesse, with notes of black cherry, bitter chocolate and loam.

"2009 was as good a growing season as you're going to get," says winemaker Ted Seghesio, who has three other 2009s that rated 90 or more points. "It was a cooler growing season, so we got a little more elegance in our wines, even though elegance is not a word that usually describes Zinfandel."

Turley winemaker Ehren Jordan agrees. "2009 is just across the board a 'wow' type of vintage," says Jordan, whose Turley Napa Valley Hayne Vineyard 2009 (\$75) rated 93 points.

The 2009 vintage was broadly successful across California. Forty-four different producers made Zins from 19 different appellations that achieved ratings of 90 points or better. There are familiar names as well as new faces among this report's top wines.

The established players include Carlisle for its Russian River Valley Carlisle Vineyard 2009 (93, \$44), Williams Selyem for its Russian River Valley Forchini Vineyard North Flats 2009 (92, \$50), Robert Biale for its Napa Valley Stagecoach Vineyards The Biale Block 2009 (92, \$44) and Ridge for its Sonoma Valley Pagani Ranch 2009 (92, \$35).

It was also good to see some veteran winemakers back in the Zinfandel game this year, including Tom Dehlinger with his Dry Creek Valley Guadagni Bros. Vineyard 2009 (93, \$30) and Peter Franus with his Mount Veeder Brandlin Vineyard 2009 (91, \$35). Jeff Cohn of JC Cellars has returned to Zin in a big way with five outstanding 2009s, including the



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Alexander Valley St. Peter's Church Vineyard (92, \$45).

Young Zin makers are keeping the old hands on their toes. There's Jordan Fiorentini with the Epoch Paso Robles Paderewski Vineyard 2009 (93, \$50), Erik Miller with the Kokomo Dry Creek Valley Winemaker's Reserve Pauline's Vineyard 2009 (92, \$32) and Mike Sullivan with the Benovia Sonoma County 2009 (91, \$38).

Looking ahead, one of California's most impressive young Zinfandel winemakers, Morgan Twain-Peterson, crafted four outstanding wines from 2010 at his Bedrock winery, including the Sonoma Valley Monte Rosso (94, \$40), a bold and ripe yet complex wine that shows a distinctive sense of place, and the Papa's All-Blacks Sonoma Valley (93, \$35), an eccentric multivineyard blend that he made with his father, Ravenswood winemaker Joel Peterson.

It's still too early to judge the overall quality of 2010. The wines are just entering the market, and so far I've only tasted a small cross-section of the vintage. A difficult growing season, particularly in comparison with 2009, compounds the uncertainty.

The 2009 vintage was long and cool. Spring was unusually warm and dry, and the growing season was moderate and uneventful, with fewer heat spikes above 90° F in July and August than in previous years. By mid-October, with a major storm on the horizon, most savvy Zinfandel producers already had their wines safely in the fermentors.

"To me the 2009s showed great structure and finesse," Cohn says. "Everything was in place. The alcohols were there, but they didn't really show in the wines." Ditto for the tannins, Seghesio says. "The tannins are there, but they're ripe and integrated."

The 2010 growing season, by comparison, was a nightmare. It got off to a late start in spring, with record-breaking low temperatures in Northern California. In May, just as many vines were in bloom, there was a deluge of rain in parts of the state, followed by one of the coolest summers on record. "It was the foggiest summer I had ever seen," says Seghesio, who has been making wine in Sonoma for three decades.

Diseases such as botrytis were a threat all season, and many growers-already worried the grapes weren't ripening-dropped crop and pulled leaves, opening up the canopy for sun exposure. Then in late August, the sun and heat finally arrived, with a vengeance. Temperatures sizzled above 100° F across the state for days on end, and broke records in Northern California. Many grapes were sunburned, but even bunches covered by leaves withered.

Old, dry-farmed, head-pruned vineyards in Northern Sonoma were the hardest hit, though the pattern of damage was unpredictable. One vineyard might be spared, while neighboring vines were fried. "The wild card in 2010 is what happened to you when it was 108 in the third week of August," Jordan says.

Although several Zinfandels will be missing from the 2010 releases as a result, including Turley's Vineyard 101 and Seghesio's Old Vine bottlings, the difficulty of the growing season may not compromise overall wine quality.

Top winemakers see promise in the 2010s, particularly for those who could afford to make the difficult choices in the vineyard and winery, weeding out that troublesome fruit. "It was a farmer's vintage to be sure," Jordan said. "People who were good farmers made excellent wines."

For now my judgment on the 2010 Zinfandels is wait and see, but there's no hurry since there are so many excellent 2009s coming into the market this year, Mike Officer's Zins among them. He was right, by the way, to watch the skies on that October day. His Carlisle Russian River Valley Papera Ranch 2009 (\$44) earned 92 points.

California-based associate editor Tim Fish has been with Wine Spectator since 2001.

- Tim Fish's Recommended California Zinfandels (*in PDF Format*)