

From the Wine Cellar
by Jo and Tom Chesworth

Primitivo or Zinfandel?

Primitivo di Manduria is a DOC (*denominazione di origine controllata*) in Italy, where the wine must be made with the primitivo grape. Primitivo wine is a deep rich red color and has concentrated flavors of cherry, clove, wild blackberry, raspberry and spice. Try an A. Mano Primitivo at \$11 a bottle. The grape dates back many centuries on the eastern coast of Italy along the Ionian Sea.

In the 17th century the grape was named primitivo by the Benedictine monks because of its early ripening (primitive in the sense of early or first). However, it has many names. Among them is Zinfandel. Although the French guard the names of their wines with zeal, the Italians are more laid back and, in fact, would rather make a sale than make a point. So...the European Union allowed them to call their wine either primitivo or zinfandel or both on the same label. Because of the popularity of zinfandel in the USA, the Italian vintners enjoy brisk sales of their Zinfandel in the US market.

From one point of view zinfandel is primitivo. DNA tests have shown that both primitivo and zinfandel are clones of the little-known Croatian grape crljenik kasteljanski. The Benedictines renamed the grape because they couldn't pronounce its real name either. The grape was transported from its Eastern European homeland across the Adriatic Sea, probably by the Phoenicians or the Greeks. Its trip to California was a bit more roundabout. It was brought to Boston as part of a collection of grape plants and by 1834 was well established in New England as a table grape (remember it ripens early – ideal for the short summers in Boston). It was subsequently carried to California where its wine became the drink of choice in the gold fields in 1849.

The origins of this California Mystery grape were lost in antiquity until at UC Davis a concerted effort was undertaken to find the origins of zinfandel. In 2001 the case was solved when DNA testing and dusty old records from the 1800s pinned down the story of the zinfandel grape.

The three clones – what's-its-name, primitivo and zinfandel – differ in taste. The new world wine is fruity with lots of alcohol (the distilled California sunshine) while the old world wine is lower in alcohol and tends to have an earthy taste (soil or dirt) probably because the fermentation is carried on at higher temperature than the usually refrigerated new world process. Compare the Italian primitivo with a California Zinfandel, for example Ravenswood Vintners Blend at \$13. By the way, although the Europeans may call their primitivo zinfandel, a US vintner may not call his zinfandel primitivo. And we wonder why we don't have a balance of trade.

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