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The Great BC

# ZINFANDEL

Round-up

STORY BY MARI KANE • Meet BC's Wine Pioneers





Zinfandel vines in Black Sage Vineyard

**W**HEN ZINFANDEL ROLLED INTO CALIFORNIA in the mid-nineteenth century, its identity was as mysterious as Clint Eastwood's in *High Plains Drifter*. The grape thrived in California's warm climate and was often blended as a jug wine with the more tannic Petite Syrah to give it backbone.

After Prohibition, much of the state's gnarly old Zinfandel vines were replaced with Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. But in 1975, when Sutter Home's winemaker discovered the taste of its free-run juice, White Zinfandel was born. Critics hated this sweet blush wine, but the public loved it. Thus, old-vine Zinfandel was saved from doom.

Today, Zinfandel is celebrated as America's grape, even though DNA testing has finally linked it to the Croatian *Crljenak Kaštelanski* varietal. Zinfandel remains on the move and has found a new home in British Columbia, particularly in the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys, where the climates are hot and dry enough.

BC is now the third largest Zinfandel region behind California and Australia. But after recently tasting eight of the ten single varietal wines, I found that BC Zin has a different style. Typically, Califor-

nia Zins are characterized by jammy, brambly fruit, with intense spice, pepper, and syrup—and notoriously high alcohol. By contrast, the BC wines are cooler in alcohol and brighter with acidity than Californians, as well as being more food friendly and elegant.

No winery in BC more embodies the wild west spirit of Zinfandel than **Rustico Farm & Cellars** in the Okanagan's new Golden Mile sub-appellation. Owner Bruce Fuller has built a saloon-style tasting room where he "cowboys up" to pour wines that honour the area's gold mining history. His Zin, Bonanza, is made from the oldest vines in BC.

About 20 years ago the previous owner grafted Zinfandel cuttings from California onto Chancellor vines. Fuller started making Bonanza in 2010, shooting for a "peppery-spicy California medium style," and has hit his target. "Customers are anxious to learn about, and they do enjoy, Zinfandel," Fuller says. "I believe there might be a good future for it here in BC."

The earliest release of BC Zinfandel came from the province's oldest plantings: **Inniskillin's** Bear Cub Vineyard north of Osoyoos. And it started as an experiment. "Back in 2000, our industry was still very young, and we didn't know what we could grow and ripen into



great wine,” remembers Danielle D’Agostino, Brand PR & Communications Manager at **Constellation Brands**, which owns Inniskillin. So they started the Discovery Series of wines to find out. That year, Inniskillin planted 12 acres of mixed clones from California, half being the Italian Primitivo variety to which Zinfandel was first connected.

At a **Vancouver Wine Fest** event in 2009, I asked Inniskillin’s former winemaker, Sandor Mayer, why their website read, “Red Zinfandel,” and he said, “Because people still think Zinfandel is white!” Not anymore. The 2013 release is dark and full of ripe black cherries and spice. And “Red” has been deleted from the web page.

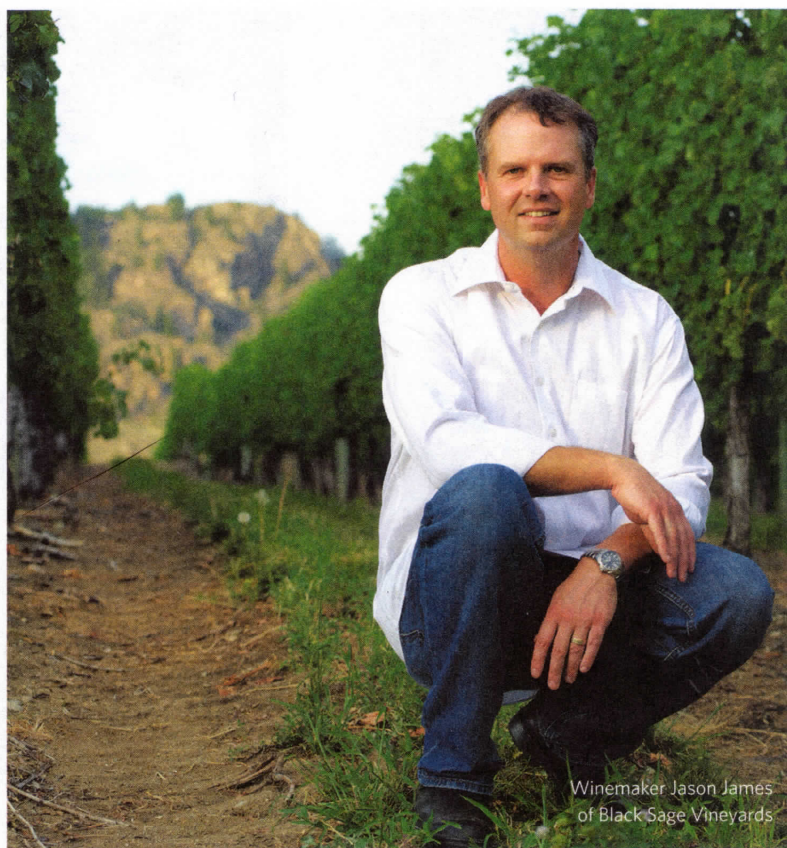
**Black Sage Vineyard**, also owned by Constellation Brands, has two acres of Zinfandel planted in their vineyard on the border of Oliver and Osoyoos. It’s one of the hottest sites in the Okanagan Valley. These vines are Primitivo clones selected from Inniskillin’s Bear Cub vineyard and grafted onto old Chardonnay vines. The first vintage of Black Sage Zinfandel came out in 2010.

Winemaker Jason James says he wasn’t sure what he was shooting for in that first vintage. “I didn’t want a big jammy alcohol bomb like California. You’ll get a little more alcohol than normal for BC, but you’ll still have the lovely primary fruit. Sometimes you let the wine express itself.”

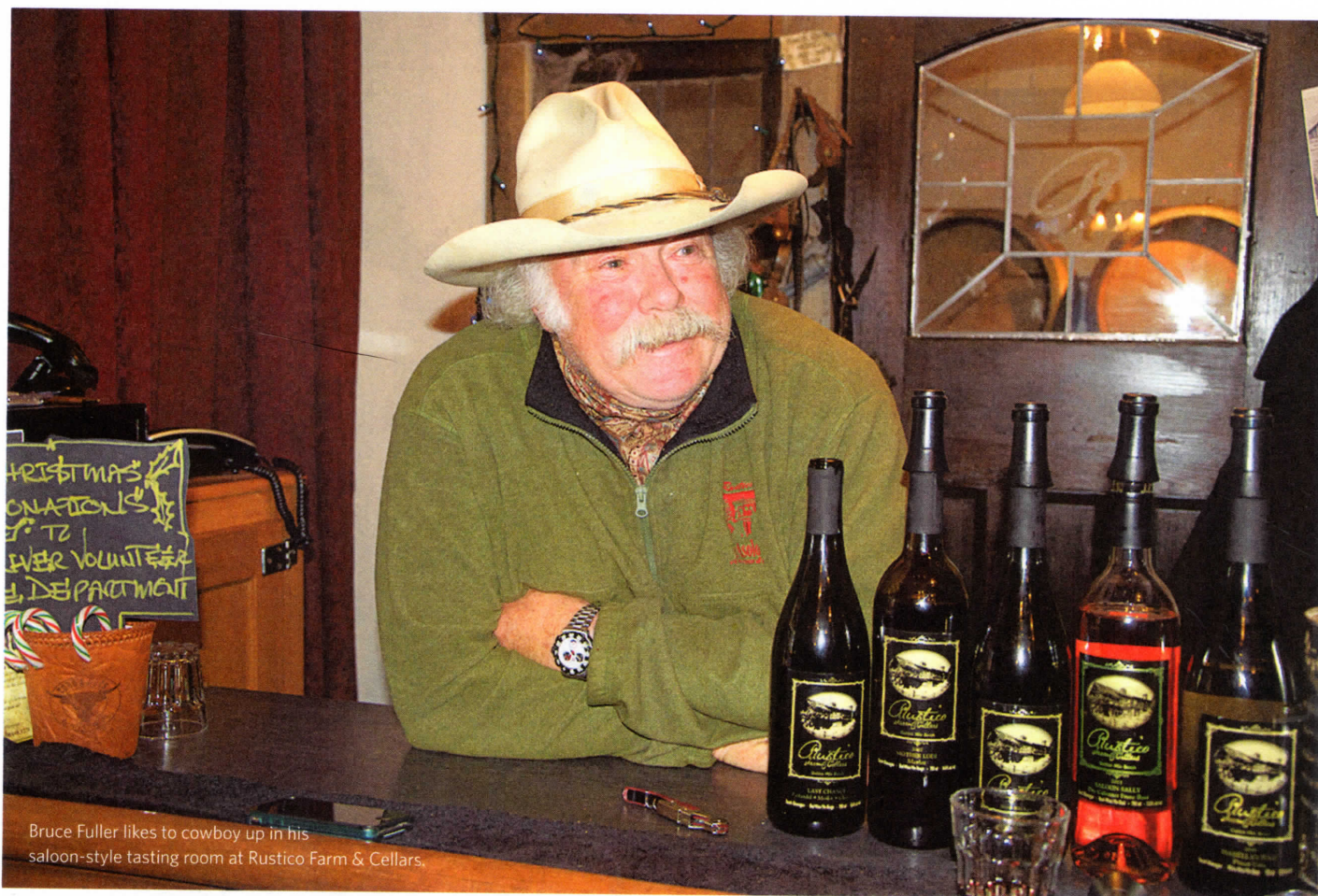
Zinfanaticism spread fast in BC. In 2003, Randy and Jessie Toor of **Desert Hills Winery** grafted it to 1.25 acres of rootstock in their Three Boys Vineyard south of Oliver. They were able to produce a first vintage in 2005. At 14.7% alcohol, the wine is quite Californian in style, and has concentrated black and purple fruit, with spices and licorice on a big body.

Why Zinfandel? Randy says, “It’s a personal favourite of mine. We get a lot of requests for it and I don’t see that changing in the future.”

About that same time and 120 kilometres north, in West Kelowna, the owners of **Mt. Boucherie Winery** got the same notion. They planted 2.5 acres of Zinfandel on their 85-acre property in the Similkameen Valley. The soil is composed largely of slate and gravel, which gives the wine its mineral edge. Elegant and racy,







Bruce Fuller likes to cowboy up in his saloon-style tasting room at Rustico Farm & Cellars.

the wine is excellent with lamb. Jim Faulkner, winemaker at Mt. Boucherie, recalls how the Gidda family was looking for something to make them stand out. "Then, after the first vintage, they realized they were onto a good idea."

It's natural that Gene Covert, of **Covert Farms Family Estate Winery**, would opt to plant Zinfandel, given that his grandfather came from California. But making Zinfandel came less as an idea than a dare, made by friend and colleague Mark Maclean, and in 2007 Gene planted two acres. He should have made a wager, because the vines thrived. Their first harvests were mixed into their MDC blend, but in 2011 they released a single varietal Zinfandel. The 2012 Reserve Zinfandel is almost black in colour, and its lively acidity makes it an elegant food wine, perfect with quesadillas and salsa, and barbecued ribs.

Zinfandel was front of mind for Bob Ferguson and Tim Watts of **Kettle Valley Winery** when they bought 14 acres of riverside bench land above Keremeos in the Similkameen Valley. They planted 3.5 acres in 2009, but two severe winters set back the vine's development and delayed their first vintage until 2011. The soils of their Great Northern Vineyards are full of river rocks and sandy silt, and the 2013 vintage's ripe fruit flavours and sizzling acidity owe

much to this terroir. Potent and bold at 16% alcohol, Kettle Valley Winery produces the most Californian of all the BC Zins I tasted. "We enjoy California Zin and wanted to see how it would develop in BC," says Ferguson. "Time will tell whether BC consumers will support BC Zin."

The newest BC Zinfandel comes from the Osoyoos-based **Young & Wyse Collection**. Six years ago, Michelle Young and Stephen Wyse planted 2.5 acres and released their first vintage in 2011. Michelle says they just love the varietal. "We're shooting for a unique BC style," she says. "The current vintage is very spicy and chocolatey!"

This is not the entire round-up of BC Zinfandel. The grape is just getting started here, in part because of climate change. Look for new releases from Oliver's **Quinta Ferreira** and Vancouver Island's **De Vine Vineyards**. With more BC producers planting Zinfandel, the possibilities are zinfinit!

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