

The casket was divided into three compartments. In the first were gold *ecus*, gleaming with wild radiance. In the second were unpolished ingots, neatly stacked...Finally, in the third compartment, Edmond plunged his hand into fistfuls of diamonds, pearls, and rubies, then let them fall in a shimmering fountain which gave off the sound of hailstones on a window-pane.

— *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Alexander Dumas)



## Raiders of the Lost Zin

purple treasures from Russian River's centennial vines

Edmond Dantes found a fabulous treasure in an island cave. Many others had been there before, but Dantes knew where to look. Something like that is happening now in Sonoma County. On another kind of barren island — a low, flood-prone plateau in an odd corner of the Russian River Valley — an increasing number of growers and vintners are finding the viticultural equivalent of lost treasure: a concentration of old zinfandel vines that yield wines with true, and wonderful, regional character.

The Russian River Valley is rapidly becoming synonymous with expensive pinot noir. In the old days, however, it was known for Italian-style table wines, luscious, sturdy reds from varietally-mixed plantings dominated by zinfandel. Many of those vineyards have quietly disappeared over the years, overtaken by housing subdivisions or high-volume chardonnay vineyards, but some have survived — thanks in large part, ironically, to the popularity of white zinfandel during the last two decades. A wine lover blushes to think of the purple jewels from those old vines going into generic pink wine, but if not for that demand all the old vines would probably have been ripped out. Acres of them were.

by Rod Smith

photography by Marvin Collins

**Most of the survivors** are concentrated south of River Road and west of Fulton, extending south along Laguna Ridge. The thickest stands of these old, dry-farmed, low-yielding vines are on a barely-elevated plateau — in geological terms a shallow anticline formed by seismic pressure in the earth's crust — centered between Wood and Piner roads, where the vines stand like ranks of soldiers besieged by hordes of houses and strip malls. It's an area of poor soil and relatively sparse fog, too warm and exposed for first-rate pinot noir and too cool for convincing cabernet sauvignon.

The area has distinctive climate and soil profiles within the larger Russian River Valley envelope. It is kissed but not totally embraced by cool marine air from the Petaluma Gap to the south and, to a lesser extent, the Russian River to the north. So that although the fog usually burns off in mid-morning (well before the Lower Reach and Green Valley areas) an average summer day will be eight to ten degrees cooler than in the Dry Creek or Alexander valleys. Soil is a lesser factor in some of the vineyards along Laguna Ridge, mainly those on the well-drained Gold Ridge sandy loam that yields prized pinot noir. The majority, those in the Wood-Piner nexus, are struggling in shallow soils over hardpan (a layer of impermeable clay), which naturally limits root growth and pretty much guarantees low yield.

Virtually all of the old vineyards are mixed plantings, although some have single-variety blocks within them. The typical field blend is predominantly zinfandel, but also includes petite sirah, alicante bouschet, carignane, grenache, mourvedre, grand noir, mondeuse and valdepeñas. There is more than a little aubun, a southern Rhône blending variety that Jancis Robinson calls "a sort of softer, lesser carignan." Lurking in some vineyards is a mysterious unidentified vine that Carlisle Winery founder Mike Officer refers to as "spiky, hairy stuff" because the leaves have pointed lobes and fuzzy undersides.

The unique varietal makeup of each vineyard is a fundamental influence on the sensory profile of its wines. Pinot noir or chardonnay vineyards that are side by side might show subtle differences due to clonal variations, whereas these old field blends show remarkable differences from the varying proportions of grape varieties supporting the primary zinfandel.

Most of the old zin plantings may well have been part of just a few big vineyards in the old days, but subdivision of property over the years has resulted in a number of smaller, individual vineyards, each under different ownership or management. Thus, a pair of

old zin vines that have been growing side by side for more than a century look strikingly different because a property line runs between them and each owner has their own way of farming. The vines in a block neighboring Lloyd Chelli's property, for example, are shaggy head-trained things, bushes bearing grapes, while Chelli's vines just a few feet away have been trained up on stakes.

The current re-emergence of these old vineyards was foreshadowed in the 1980s by



Old vine Russian River Valley zin has the best of both worlds, mouthwatering fruit and soft, pliable tannin. You can make a big trophy wine out of it, but why would you want to? It's just so delicious.

— Greg LaFollette,  
winemaker at DeLoach

several single-vineyard zins from DeLoach Vineyards. Cecil DeLoach bought or leased old vineyards that were apparently on their last legs but still delivered small amounts of intensely flavorful grapes each year. His Papera, Barbieri, Pelletti, and Gambogi vineyard zins were true cult wines, produced in tiny quantities and tasted and discussed by an equally miniscule company of zin fanatics. In the turmoil leading up to the sale of DeLoach in 2003, those vineyards were divested or changed hands (except for Gambogi, which is still owned by Cecil DeLoach), and the fruit became more generally available. The timing couldn't have been better, dovetailing as it did with a new surge of interest in distinguished, site-specific zinfandel.

Grower Tom Feeny knew an opportunity when he saw one. His family's blocks of old zin vines — the former Montafi and Baci-

galupi vineyards — had been saved from chardonnization by DeLoach's successful white zin program. Now, he astutely snapped up the Papera and Barbieri vineyards. Currently, the Feeny family sells old-vine zin to Carlisle, Williams Selyem, Starry Night, Eric Ross, Ledson, and Sapphire Hill.

According to Tom Feeny's nephew, Mike Feeny, who has managed the vineyards since his uncle's death two years ago, most of the vines are a hundred years old, some were planted in the 1920s, and the youngest old-time plantings date from 1945. He knows the area's history very well. In fact, this is the second time his family has owned the Papera vineyard. "My father bought it from Charlie Papera in 1971, right at the beginning of the grape boom," he told me. "Then later, he sold it to Cecil DeLoach."

While the Feenys were coming full-circle on the growing side in the late 1990s, vintner Mike Officer was becoming the new alcalde of old-vine zin in Sonoma County. Carlisle Winery now rivals established zin houses like Ravenswood, Turley, Biale, and even Ridge with around a dozen limited bottlings of old-vine zinfandel and Rhône varietals each year, most from single vineyards.

The Carlisle Winery story is a classic California tale of a passion for wine taking on a life of its own. Until just a few years ago, Mike Officer led a happy, carefree life as a software designer for a San Francisco financial services firm. A self-described "cork dork," he liked to spend his free time getting together with other wine geeks to taste and talk about wine — especially old-vine zinfandel.

Then he started making his own wine. It began innocently enough with a few gallons in the spare room of his Marina-district apartment. But the habit quickly escalated. He began to live for that time of the year when he would drive north to score some grapes for his next batch of zinfandel. A few gallons became a few cases, and before he knew it the habit was careening out of control.

Soon he convinced his wife, Kendall Carlisle, to move to Santa Rosa to be closer to the source of the grapes he craved. They even chose their house because it had a place in the garage that would perfectly accommodate a wine barrel.

Hah! One barrel became three, and the garage morphed into a winery. The cars had to live outside. And now, boys and girls, Mike Officer's hands are purple. So are his teeth, sometimes. And, yes, he finally had to quit his day job, because he was spending all his time tramping around vineyards and making wine.

Finally, in 1998 the Officers left civilized Santa Rosa and went to live in an old house



Mike Officer of Carlisle Winery

surrounded by even older grape vines in the wilds of Russian River Valley. Not coincidentally, the property they bought was the old Pelletti ranch, the source of perhaps the most consistently impressive of the DeLoach single-vineyard bottlings. Officer didn't bottle a wine from his vineyard until 2001, and still can't use the historic Pelletti name, which is trademarked. No matter. By any name, Officer's first few Carlisle Vineyard bottlings are some of the most outstanding zins I've tasted, and they're pure Russian River Valley in their balanced combination of dense yet crystalline fruit and velvety tannin — they're slurpy, lip-smacking zins, yet also elegant and structured.

Other Carlisle bottlings from the Barbieri (planted in 1905), Feeny (a block planted in 1926), Papera (1934), and Marcucci (1922) vineyards are variations on that theme. The Barbieri '03, for example (tasted from barrel) has radiant black cherry flavors and gently gripping tannin, while the Tom Feeny '03 has a wildly effusive scent of berry jam spiced with black pepper and bay, with that same

soft, luscious texture. "When that fruit starts fermenting you can smell it twenty feet away," said Officer. "You just want to dive in and swim around in it." Actually, I might choose to paddle around in the Marcucci '03, with its piercing rose petal and peppercorn fragrance and fine, dusty tannin.

After his immersion in winemaking, Officer has found that what really fascinates him about old-vine zin is the vines themselves. "What I learned in the garage is that you have to have control of the grapes," he said. For example, he's struck by the paradox of having to treat each vine individually in order to approach uniform ripening. "The challenge is that you're dealing with a heterogeneous set of vines that grow more different every year," he said. "The trick is to create homogeneity, vine by vine. How many spurs? How much crop? You can't blow through and treat every vine the same."

Hartford Court bottles several distinctly different zins from vineyards in close proximity along Wood Road: Fanucchi, Arata, Highwire (from the Chelli vineyard), and

Hartford (from a block of old vines owned by Don Hartford). Winemaker Mike Sullivan shows a master's touch with the old-vine fruit, consistently producing ultra-ripe and intense wines that are pinpoint-balanced with layers of textured flavor. "In this cool climate we get more natural acidity at high maturity, and that gives the wines a balance that you don't get at the same relative ripeness in a warmer area," he explained, adding that old-vine Russian River Valley zin is one of his favorite wines. "Having grown up here and being a zin lover, the one thing that sticks out to me is that the wines have a clarity, real delineated fruit with a pop, or vibrancy, with a greater range of red fruits and black fruits than you see in warmer climates."

Peter Fanucchi told me he will harvest his family's century-old vineyard on Wood Road for the 34th time this year. Although most of his fruit goes to Hartford Court, he produces a few hundred cases under his own Fanucchi label. These are more restrained, lower-alcohol zins meant to go with food.

A dark-eyed, intense man with a real pas-



Mike Sullivan, winemaker for Hartford Court



Hartford bottle by Elena Bessarabova; all other photography by Marvin Collins



Peter Fanucchi

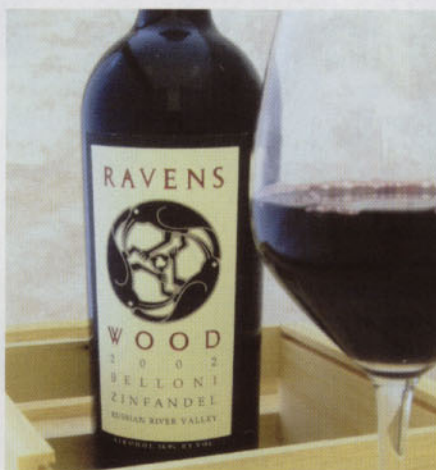


sion for grape growing, Fanucchi prunes his vineyard himself and talks about individual vines the way a father talks about children — their virtues, their problems and odd quirks of personality. It was Fanucchi who decided, in the 1970s, to “raise up” the crowns of his massive head-trained vines, training them up on stakes. “It makes the vines easier to work,” Fanucchi told me. “You get the fruit up out of the frost zone, it ripens better, and there’s more of it.” The practice was widely adopted in the Wood Road neighborhood, making many blocks look more like grape orchards than vineyards.

Across the road from Fanucchi, Lloyd Chelli’s vineyard is an odd sight to anyone who’s spent any time at all around vineyards. He went Fanucchi’s “raising up” one better, training the old head-pruned zin vines up on wires. It’s a little like seeing a bunch of wrestlers dancing as the *corps de ballet* in Swan Lake, but Chelli — and Hartford Court winemaker Mike Sullivan, who buys all of Chelli’s grapes for the Highwire bottling — believes the unorthodox system makes for better wines. “When we raised ‘em at first they were so happy they went wild,” he chuckled as we

strolled along the rows. “They felt freedom for the first time. But they settled down on the cordons, and now the grapes get better color and flavor.” A committed innovator, Chelli has also been experimenting with a circular fruiting wire that trains the cordon into a kind of halo above the vine. “I’m aiming for uniform ripeness, and that’s hard to do with old vine zin.”

Ravenswood’s Belloni Vineyard Zinfandel



(labeled Wood Road for several vintages in the late '90s) comes from a block of vines owned by Chelli’s neighbor Richard Belloni. In the context of other Ravenswood zinfandelings it’s a good illustration of Russian River Valley zin character. Where Ravenswood’s Sonoma Valley bottlings such as Barricia and Old Hill show dark fruits and stern tannin, the Belloni simply gushes bright raspberry flavors over soft tannin and succulent acidity.

This resurgence, in force, of old-vine Russian River Valley zin is one of the most exciting developments in California wine in recent years. It’s amazing to think that a significant pocket of old-vine zin is just reaching a general audience in the 21st century — and that those venerable vines have been languishing in relative obscurity, unknown except to devoted zin hounds, all this time. Unfortunately, the supply is limited. The vines aren’t getting any younger, and you can’t just go out and plant a brand-new 100-year-old vineyard. But growers are selecting from the old vines to propagate their new plantings, so there will be continuity of vineyard character. Meanwhile, drinking these wines is a little like finding treasure. ■