

## Dream On

The Golden State of California has economy larger than most nations, which seems to go hand in hand with big cars, big egos and huge wineries. Only France Italy and Spain produce more wine than the USA and California produces over 9/10 of that. With its vast population, the US makes it to number three on the list of biggest wine drinking nations, though unlike the UK where wine drinking is become national habit, 80% of wine in the States is consumed by just 8% of the population.

### ***The Missionary Position***

As with much of the Americas, Catholics have a lot to answer for. In California, it was Franciscan missionaries who planted the first vinifera grapes (the species that is responsible for all noble wine grapes) in around 1770. Their "Mission" grape was the backbone of the industry for the next 8 decades, though it wasn't until the Gold Rush in 1849 that wine growing spread throughout the state. Europe's vineyards were devastated by Phylloxera (a bug related to aphids that sucks voraciously on vine roots and kills the vine) around the turn of the century and this drove massive investment in US vineyards especially in Sonoma and Napa. One advantage for California has been the lack of either entrenched viticultural traditions, or a stubborn peasant culture resistant to change. Wine research and education started at the University of California back around 1880 and still thrives today – though an unquestioning over-dependence on academic recommendations has got Californians into trouble at times.

### ***The Moral Minority***

Prohibition, which lasted from 1920 to 1933, destroyed much of the wine market, though it gave some of today's biggest names such as Gallo their first break. The Gallo brothers originally made their living shipping grapes for home wine-making and applied for a winemaking licence as soon as Prohibition was lifted. Even so there was not another major burst of investment in wine until 1970s, though another round of anti-alcohol sentiment and Phylloxera hit the industry in the late 1980s.

### ***Disease and Devastation***

It seems ironic that a state which built its wine industry on the back of the destruction of Europe's vineyards by Phylloxera should fall foul of this pest itself. Unfortunately, the industry took as gospel the recommendation from UC Davis (University of California's home of viticultural research) to plant on a rootstock called AXR1. It now seems obvious that using one genetically identical rootstock so widely is potentially providing dinner on a massive scale to rapidly evolving insects. Even worse, one of the parents of AXR1 is actually the susceptible vinifera species of grape vine. Lo and behold, in the early 1990s a new biotype of Phylloxera appeared which proceeded to infest its way across the state. Massive and expensive replanting was the result – though many producers now admit it gave them the chance to plant better clones and match varieties to location.

Pierce's disease is the latest cause of panic for the industry, though in fact it has been around for 200 years. It's caused by a bacterium called *Xylella fastidiosa*, which infects the xylem of the grapevine, and blocks water transport around the plant. It kills vines within 2 years, though it doesn't affect wine quality. In the

past, it has been spread by an insect called a “blue-green sharpshooter” which doesn’t fly very far. The problem today is that it has skipped hosts and infected the “glassy-winged sharpshooter”, a voracious feeder that can fly long distances and is spreading rapidly. Just for good measure, one of the other plants that can host the disease is oleander, which is conveniently planted along all California’s major highways (almost like rest stops along the freeway for tired insects to fill up).

The US Dept of Agriculture has declared a state of emergency and over \$60 million has been committed to research and control measures. This may seem extreme for a disease that so far has only hit around 1% of California’s vineyards, but wine grapes are the 3<sup>rd</sup> most valuable agricultural crop in the state. Biological control using a parasitic wasp is looking promising, though plans for blanket insecticide spraying have met a lot of opposition- no surprise in such an environmentally sensitive state. It will be a while before the industry can breathe easy again.

### ***Grapes and Flavour***

California has the potential to offer an exciting choice of wines to the consumer with at least 69 red varieties and 38 white varieties crushed in 2001. Chardonnay still rules though, with 29% of the US market, followed by Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Blush/White Zinfandel. These 4 share three quarters of the market. Behind them reds, especially Pinot Noir, Syrah and red Zinfandel are gaining ground and all grew by over 30%.

The average selling price of each variety is revealing as it shows which varieties are in serious demand. Pinot Noir commanded over \$1800 per ton in 2001, with Cabernet Sauvignon at \$1062, Merlot \$993 and Zinfandel just \$519. Cabernet Franc at \$1481 and Petit Sirah £1006 are the surprises and suggest demand growing outside the big few. For whites in 2001, for the first time Sauvignon Blanc sold at a higher price than Chardonnay (\$858 compared to \$837). While it’s perhaps not a surprise to see trendy Viognier near the top of the price charts at \$958, Riesling, Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer are all up around the \$900 mark or higher, while the cheapest grape of the lot is French Colombard at just \$129 per ton.

### ***A Question of Taste***

There’s little doubt that California produces some world beating wines, though most of these are at stratospheric prices and produced in tiny quantities. These so-called cult wines are difficult to get even if you can afford them and are rarely offered for tasting, even to the trade. There’s tendency for the US consumer to buy by numbers so chasing Parker scores seems to have an enormous influence on winemaking styles, with his apparent preference for fleshy lush inky wines with lashings of new oak. Influential as he may be at the top end, Parker points are largely irrelevant to normal wine drinkers – after all most of us spend well under £5 a bottle when we are out shopping for wine.

The American taste seems quite different to British palates – Chardonnay is made is a distinctly buxom Baywatch style, with lots of oak and softness, Sauvignon Blanc tends to be made like a baby chardonnay, again with oak, a good dose of sugar and none of the zesty gooseberry and nettle style we tend to look for. Not a wine category I often find myself enjoying, though an exception is the mouth-watering lime and gooseberry Dunnigan Hills Fumé Blanc (Marks and Spencer £6.99).

Reds are often rather light soft and lacking tannins or body for our tastes. Californian wineries have tended not to think very hard about export as they have such a large market at home. However with vast new vineyard areas now in production the US has now gone into surplus – in other words it produces more than it can drink at home, so export is getting a lot more attention. Producers like Fetzer are targeting the UK specifically with their deliciously fresh spicy Chardonnay/Viognier blend (£5.99 Tesco, Safeway, Oddbins, Majestic and others) and its supple warming red partner, a Zinfandel/Shiraz blend (£5.99 Tesco, Safeway and others). Kendall Jackson has also developed dual varietal range with the UK in mind and the Semillon/Chardonnay (Sainsbury/Safeway £6.99) is an appealing cream and pineapple blend.

## ***Zin after Zin***

South Africa has Pinotage, Chile has Carmenere and Argentina her Malbec, but for the US Zinfandel is the signature variety. Arguments still rage as to its true origins, though some researchers believe it is genetically identical to Italy's Primitivo. The very latest news is that Zinfandel may well be a variety called Crljenak, grown on an island off the Dalmatian coast, and that while Primitivo is similar; it is not identical and may be a clone of the variety. Zinfandel seems to have first arrived in the US in the 1820s and its popularity has varied. Red wine made from Zinfandel has been such a tough sell at times that Sutter Home invented "white Zinfandel" in the early 1970s. It was made by running juice straight off the skins (the pigments are all in the skins) and fermenting as white wine. It tends to have a very pale pink colour and is made in a sweetish, easy-drinking style – it's enormously popular in the States with nearly a quarter of the wine market. However, while it can be found over here, sweetish pink wines don't seem to suit the British climate. Zinfandel as a red wine comes in styles ranging from light and fruity, to seriously fine wines such as Ridge Lytton Springs. A couple of good benchmarks to try at affordable prices are Ravenswood Amador county Zinfandel (Thresher/Wine Rack/Bottoms Up) or Ironstone Zinfandel (£6.49 Waitrose).

## ***Nature and Nurture***

Most vineyards are pretty bare inhospitable places to anything except vines. In these green conscious times, many producers are starting to realise that the old "rape and pillage" approach to viticulture is no longer acceptable. Sustainable viticulture is the current buzz phrase with many producers going the full way to farming organically. Fetzer, with their Bonterra brand are leading this march, and are the largest growers of organic grapes in the world. They have just gained UK Soil Association approval – a significant step as EU organic standards are stricter than US regulations. The Bonterra wines are proof that buying organic doesn't mean compromising on quality – the Bonterra Chardonnay showed very well in Wine World issue one (£8.49 Waitrose, Oddbins and others) and for a special occasion treat the inviting fragrant spicy Bonterra Roussanne (£9.99 Virginwines.com, Oddbins fine wine stores) is made from an unusual white grape from the Rhone.

## ***Branded***

For all the bewildering variety of wines produced in California and the impressive statistics quoted for exports to the UK (growth in value of +32% last year), shopping for Californian wines in most UK supermarkets and high street retailers is distinctly uninspiring. The big brands of Gallo (who also produce Turning Leaf and Garnet Point), plus Blossom Hill, Sutter Home, Paul Masson and Fetzer just about covers it, with a few own labels thrown in.

It's well worth seeking out a few of the different names that do make it onto the shelves – look for the juicy Delicato Shiraz (Sainsbury £5.99) and chunkier plum and pepper Pepperwood Syrah (£5.99 Safeway). Pinot Noir is generally highly priced and sought after wherever it comes from and America has a strong claim to making the best Pinot Noirs outside Burgundy. Most as you might expect are pricey, but Estancia Pinot Noir (Safeway £9.99, Asda £9.93) is a charming elegant wine. For an alternative to Cabernet sauvignon try Cabernet Franc from Ironstone (Majestic £6.49) and as a wonderful way to finish off a meal Andrew Quady makes a pair of lusciously sweet, lightly fortified wines in the shape of Elysium Black Muscat (£6.99 Majestic) and Essensia Orange Muscat (Majestic £6.99, Virginwines.com £7.99). Both are in handy half bottles.

Wines from the Golden State are clearly over here to stay, though I would definitely like to see a wider choice outside the big brands (and maybe one of these days I will get to taste some of the cult icons and find out whether they really live up to their reputations and prices!).

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