

STORYBOOK MOUNTAIN

Napa

Zinfandel, California's mysterious "native" vine, is today recognized as one of America's greatest and most versatile vinous treasures, and Jerry Seps, professor-turned-vintner, deserves much of the credit for that recognition.

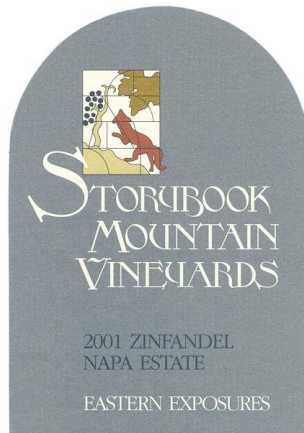
When Seps and his wife Sigrid purchased the old Grimm winery north of Calistoga in 1976, renaming it "Storybook Mountain", there wasn't a vine left from what had once been northern Napa County's second-largest winery. And the last thing for any reasonable would-be vintner in California to have contemplated would have been planting zinfandel.

In those days, there were two sorts of zin, and plenty of old vines left to supply both: cheap quaffing wine, and a tiny minority of conscientiously-crafted, varietally-labelled wines from renegades like Joseph Swan and Ridge's Dave Bennion. Cabernet was king, even if the Napa kingdom was still small. "White zin" had just been invented by Sutter Home, but who could have guessed not just that this sweet pink wine would become ubiquitous, but that it might become the only thing to stand between many an old zinfandel vineyard and the dozer?

And yet, in '76, Jerry Seps was thinking "zin". "Zinfandel had had been planted here in the 1880s," he relates, "and the last Grimm vines had only disappeared in 1964. This area was known for Zinfandel, and I came up to plant what went best on this land." It would be an under-statement to say that it took tenacity to stick with this vision, to build a winery dedicated solely to zinfandel, to hone quality from young vines and to – eventually! – even turn a profit. But Seps accomplished more than that.

Tirelessly beating the drum for zin in its darkest hour, Jerry and his wines promised and then did much to deliver the renaissance of "America's grape."

Truth be told, quite a number of folks alighted upon gold in the seventies by staking their viticultural claim in the eastern foothills of the Mayacamas Range. Think of the Novaks at Spottswoode. But Jerry Seps, alone in championing zinfandel, could be a bit more sure of *himself*. This grape, if no other, had been subjected to generations of



trial and error in Northern California. Storybook's volcanic hillsides, sheltered from afternoon sunburn and rich in minerals and water-retentive clay, harbored the promise of profoundly fragrant, spicy, well-structured wines.

To get class from zinfandel, it is necessary to restrain its tendency to "piss juice" even in to old age. Here, starting from scratch, Jerry Seps had a certain advantage. He remembers choosing "the scion wood that did the worst in U. C. Davis's tests" to achieve small berries and low cluster counts. His determination to farm organically was yet another crazy Seps idea ahead of its time and conducive to low yields and high quality.

"If I had to do it over again," he told the *Wine Spectator* a decade ago, "I might not have done it. But it was the opportunity to be a Renaissance man or woman. To have a plot of land and have what comes out of it totally dependent on what you're doing, you don't have a chance to do that very often in life."

Napa zinfandels are nearly always more restrained than their Sonoma or southern cousins, and Seps seeks refinement and balance rather than the dominance of jammy fruit and sheer power that have found favor with a great many wine critics. But what Ridge's Paul Dramer calls "the sensuality of zin" is never far from the surface of any Storybook wine, nor is the sense of a certain special place or the soul of a noble native grape.

Total acreage: 45

Average production: 9,000 cases

Varieties: Zinfandel

Vinification: Cool, slow fermentations for as long as a month on the skins; maturation in small barrels; minimal and gentlest-possible handling and clarifying.

Zinfandel Mayacamas Range

This is the Storybook Mountain flagship, for years a benchmark for Zin quality.

Zinfandel Atlas Peak

Storybook's newest Zin comes from Mead Ranch, atop Atlas Peak, eastern Napa.

Zinfandel "Eastern Exposures"

Source from sites that will emphasize elegance of fruit, this bottling is finished with a hint of Viognier, as it were Côte Rôtie.

Zinfandel Estate Reserve

A selection of a few of the best barrels of the vintage - extremely limited.

"Storybook Mountain has been one of the consistent practitioners of the elegant, age worthy style of Zinfandel. Recently, the wines have taken on more accessibility without compromising their ability to age ..."

"The character of Storybook Mountain Zinfandels is one that offers considerable structure [plus] a deep, rich, profound, spicy, rasp-berry fruitiness intermingled with the scents of minerals and pepper."

Robert Parker, The Wine Advocate