

1999 Scherrer Zinfandel Futures Offering & 1998 Fall Releases

The 1999 vintage should yield many dark, crowd-pleasing red wines and the press has already begun whipping up excitement. I'll try to describe our 1999 Zinfandels by comparing and contrasting them with past vintages where appropriate. First, a quick discussion of the very near past.

For me, our most recent release, the 1998 'Old & Mature' Zinfandel, is the most food-versatile, best-balanced Zinfandel we have bottled to date. Judging by how fast it sold out, many agreed. It has wonderful delicate perfumes that are usually 'cooked' out by warm vintage conditions, or overshadowed by more primary red and black fruit jam flavors. While the wine press has been (rightly or wrongly) looking for 'signs of weakness' in every 1998 Zinfandel, our 1998 will age very well on its balance rather than by sheer tannic brute force or embalming acidity. Time will tell, for sure. Those who have known our wines since our first vintage, 1991, understand our wines have a long 'sweet spot' in their aging curve.

This said, I find the 1999 vintage to be more of a flashy, brash and brawny sort of Zinfandel vintage for us. There are more layers of flavor and texture than in 1997, but still somewhat less graceful than in 1998 at this point. For example, the 1999 Shale Terrace wine was so "meaty, beaty, big & bouncy" right after pressing, I was concerned about stylistic continuity for this area. It has since revealed more of its typical character, but the vintage "song remains the same," leaving the glass with a "purple haze." Even the Vin Gris was anything but a "whiter shade of pale." [Please forgive the musical references. It can't be helped]

In further comparison, our 1999 Zinfandels seem to have more in common with the racy 1995 and 1997's than the "well-tempered clavichord" of 1998's. These 1998 Zinfandels are like music on Compact Disk. It is a great format for delicately complex compositions from Mozart or Vivaldi to be played at moderate volume. 1999 is like music pressed into vinyl (remember that stuff?). The analog signal 'pops' and grinds a bit, but is a great format for Neil Young, Iron Butterfly, Pearl Jam, etc. to be played at high volume. Does this suggest that Pinot Noir is best-suited to DVD? How about 'Pinot Noir in allier minor'? Nevers mind. Barely appropriate. Better bung it up.

I have probably given the impression that I appreciate finesse more than power. Actually, I appreciate both, and admire wines most when they possess both qualities...in appropriate balance. Yin and Yang, I guess. It is more important to look at the whole, rather than any one part.

If possible, please come and taste our 1999 Zinfandels for yourself at our ninth annual **barrel tasting, August 5 & 6, 2000 from 10 to 5**. This is not advertised to the general public. Only those on our mailing list and their guests are invited to this 'private party.' Family and friends are welcome, but if you wish to bring more people than you usually do, please just let us know so we can plan our resources. Please drive slowly on our shared driveway, as there are often children in the area. In addition, please do not park along the north side of the gravel road near the other winery, which shares our driveway. We need to respect our neighbor's privacy. There is additional unpaved parking available around the 'rear' (west) of our winery, and we plan to have someone assist with parking. I promise there will be no music.

1999 Old & Mature Vines Zinfandel: Probably all of you are familiar with the style and personality of this wine, a great expression of Zinfandel on the clay soils of the Scherrer Vineyard. I am pleased with the depth of black and blue fruit flavors, as well as the relative finesse and balance it displays for the vintage. As I write this, soon after its first racking, it is slightly more tannic than the previous vintage, but it should come

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together well by August. Considering the continued low yields, and the growth of our Zinfandel futures program, there will probably not be much, if any, available for retail sale from us upon release. *Estimated retail at release: \$28 per bottle. Futures price: \$225 per case.*

1999 Shale Terrace Zinfandel: As I said earlier, immediately after pressing, I was concerned that this wine would be too dark and brooding to be a typical 'Shale' wine. Fortunately, it has opened up to reveal its mostly red fruit personality, only in a slightly chewier package. Yields were low in this area again, so this will probably not be available for retail sale by the bottle in April. *Estimated retail at release: \$25 per bottle. Futures price: \$195 per case.*

1999 Special Cuvée Zinfandel: Sometimes, we find ourselves with the opportunity to make a special wine. While the 1997 Special Cuvée, our first, was from one specific area of the vineyard, this time it came from many different parts. It is a synthesis of small batches where I played a bit with techniques. All were fermented with lots of perfectly ripened whole grape clusters, and one batch had additional carbonic maceration with uninoculated fermentation. This is a very exotic and seductive wine. Taste it 'blind' and try to guess the variety. Huge amounts of red, black and blue fruit ooze from this wine. On the mouth, it is both 'sweet,' yet hugely structured (probably from all those ripe, whole clusters). It has continued to consume the liberal amounts of new oak I have offered it with the gusto of a child eating ice cream directly from the carton (undignified, but lots of fun). Like a drum solo at a rock concert, it's not for everyone. If you are from the *explosive, soaring gobs of school*, you will probably really enjoy this wine. If not, don't buy this wine without tasting first. *Estimated retail at release: \$28 per bottle. Futures price: \$225 per case.*

Non-Zinfandel update: The 1997 Cabernet Sauvignon, our first release of this variety, was well received by those who matter the most...you. Even the wine writer who has reviewed it so far liked it a lot. The same goes for the 1998 Chardonnays. While not reviewed, the 1999 Vin Gris has been very popular among restaurants as well. Regarding upcoming vintages, the 1998 Cabernet pleases me more than the 1997 did at this point. The 1999 Scherrer Vineyard Chardonnay is yet another refinement over the previous vintage. The 1999 Helfer Vineyard Chardonnay is riper and richer than the previous vintage, which is either an improvement or not, depending upon what one looks for in Chardonnay.

The 1999 Pinot Noirs are progressing well in barrel. There will probably be four bottlings released sometime next year: One Sonoma Coast, two Russian River Valleys called 'Little Sister' [not meant to be a musical reference] & 'Big Brother' [no, really!], and a Hirsch vineyard designate probably to be called 'Diaphanous' [... saw right through that one]. Blending decisions were difficult because of the huge number of potential combinations, and I had no prior experience with these clones or vineyard areas. Happily, I will be allowed to work with many of them for at least another vintage.

We will hold our ninth **annual Zinfandel barrel tasting** at our winery facility on **August 5&6, from 10-5**. You will be able to taste the new Zinfandels for yourself and perhaps see how they work with a few different new French barrel types. A map to the winery building with the address and telephone number is included in this newsletter. **The deadline for orders is the last day of the tasting, August 6, 2000. The 1999 Zinfandels will be released in the spring of 2001.**

"Signed, sealed & delivered": We can only set up futures purchases for either pickup at our two open house weekends on March 31 & April 1, and April 7&8, or shipping to the legal or 'reciprocal states'

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listed on the order form. If you live in a ‘shipping-challenged’ state, and set up your futures purchase for pick-up, you can find a ‘legal’ destination between now and April, then have it shipped. Alternatively, you can have someone you trust come pick the wine up and hold it or somehow find a way to get it to you.

Future futures: Our Zinfandel futures are here to stay. We plan to continue to offer futures on our usual (and sometimes unusual) bottlings of Zinfandel indefinitely. We don’t have plans to expand futures to our other smaller-production varietals, but don’t worry about the Zin futures disappearing. If we ever have to close the list, or do allocations, I think the most civilized way to do so is to allow one to continue their typical pattern of ordering. Buy what you want. Pass on the rest. No games. No calculations. No penalty. Solid. Simple. It’s easier for all of us that way. Any suggestions?

As for the 2000 growing season so far: Early on, it appeared as though 2000 would offer a large crop of Zinfandel. Due to uneven weather during the Zinfandel bloom, things have changed. “Strange days” with temperature changes of warm to cool, then hot to cool again during bloom goofed up the pollinization of Zinfandel flowers. Now as the tiny berries have begun to develop, it looks like it will be another moderate crop potential. There should be lots of smaller, looser clusters. This is usually good for wine quality, especially when the berry development is somewhat even. Rain at harvest would pose less of a problem with looser clusters. With our Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, it looks like another moderate size crop is in store for us. The Pinot Noirs come from so many diverse areas, it is hard to generalize, but it looks like looser clusters in the Russian River Valley.

The record high temperatures in early June did not damage the vineyard in Alexander Valley much at all. Only some of the younger or weaker vines showed any sign of slight heat damage on some leaves or clusters exposed to full afternoon sun. We would normally remove the crop from those vines anyway. But because of the earlier warm spell in May, and sufficient soil moisture, our vines became somewhat acclimated, and took the searing June heat in stride. Our belief that it will likely be a warm summer indicated restraint with the early leaf pulling as well, which has also helped in the heat.

With my dad’s 70-something years of experience, he frequently reminds us that it can get pretty warm at the vineyard during the growing season. The good news about the June heat spell is that young leaves forming now, which will be very important later in the season, have become well acclimated to high temperatures and should tolerate any later heat spells much better. If it remains a warm growing season, the fruit will develop with a little sun in the morning & midday, and a little shade in the afternoon for a civilized ‘sleepy time time’ siesta.