



Best Zinfandel

MAURITSON FAMILY WINERY

By Julie Fadda

When we asked Mauritsen Wines' winemaker/owner Clay Mauritsen what makes the perfect Zinfandel, he said it depends who you're asking. "I think what makes any wine perfect is that it represents the fruit." As far as his wine goes, he gives a lot of credit to his family, who oversees the vineyards, and also to the growers from whom he sources.

The Mauritsen family, it turns out, has deep roots in Dry Creek Valley. Clay is part of its sixth generation of grape growers—we're talking 140 years (since 1868), so they know a little something about the fruit. (OK, more than just a little.) The family's vineyards are all located in the Dry Creek Valley, Alexander Valley and Rockpile appellations. Clay is the first to start a winery.



Carrie and Clay Mauritsen with their dog SoHo

His first vintage was a 1998 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel, and a reserve was added the following year. In 2002, he began making other varietals (today you'll find nine varietals, a couple are blends), and since then has developed six different Zinfandels. Four of those are under the Rockpile label (still part of Mauritsen Wines, and viewed as its single-vineyard label), while the Dry Creek Valley and the

Grower's Reserve are labeled Mauritsen.

"What's more indicative of Dry Creek Valley than Zinfandel?" he asks. "It's what we wanted to hang our hat on. Plus, we have exceptional property in the Rockpile area, and good family relationships with other growers." He points out that the Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel is different because of its flavors of raspberry and blackberry, as well as its structure and balance. "We have unique



The tasting room on Dry Creek Road is open daily.



Mauritsen has six different Zinfandels.

growing conditions," says Mauritsen. "The narrow valley allows for a higher percentage of hillside vineyards—perfect for Zinfandel, which needs proper drainage." The Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel is made from nine different vineyards, with 80 percent estate and 20 percent purchased from growers. One of the estate vineyards overlaps the Dry Creek Valley and Rockpile appellations, "which is very unique and gives the wine its structure and balance."

Mauritsen and assistant winemaker Ashley Herzberg take what Clay calls an "old school" approach to winemaking. All the fruit is sorted by hand ("but my brothers and father are doing such a great job in the vineyard, sorting needs are minimized—it's one of my great advantages"). The grapes are then fermented in open-top tanks. An extended cold soak captures the fruit's characteristics. They're punched down daily, then pressed as close to dryness as possible. "Our Zins have high tannins," he says. "They're all very dry, with no residual sugar." After some gentle pressing, the wine settles in the tank and then goes into the barrels (mostly French oak; the Grower's Reserve is done with 100 percent French oak). It stays in the barrel from 14 to 28 months.

Current releases include the deep, dark 2006 Rockpile Ridge Vineyard Zinfandel (which was almost sold out at press time); Jack's Cabin Vineyard Zinfandel, which is more fruit forward, silky and almost jammy. "It's a great Zin to do with food, because it has great acid," says Mauritsen; and the dense, spicy Cemetery Vineyard Zinfandel. This June, the 2007 Westphall Ridge Vineyard Zinfandel will be released, which is grown at 1,400 feet by the Gloeckner family, as will the 2006 Grower's Reserve.

The winery's tasting room, which is open daily, opened to the public in 2004 (the winery opened in 1998)—the same year Clay married his wife, Carrie (who oversees the tasting room), who is originally from South Africa. "Thank you so much [for the award]," says Clay. "We live in one of the best Zinfandel regions, and to think we received this among the other great producers is an incredible honor." ■

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