

Domaine de la Terre Rouge

TERRE ROUGE® AND EASTON WINES



Easton Zinfandel: A Taste of Place

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Growing up in the blue-collar Midwest, I had no concept of discretionary income. We weren't poor by any measure, but frugality was a way of life, and we admired good quality at a fair price.

Authenticity and regionality were also things that informed my early days. Frankly, we took those for granted back in the late 1960s. Most of the food I ate growing up was produced not far away. We only had tomatoes, corn and oranges when they were in season. My grandfather was a butcher at the corner grocery store he owned, and he worked his way through a side of beef every week.

Even now, those ideas influence who I am, for better or worse, a yin to any yang that might get too extravagant or mass-produced. In the world of wine that's a tough balance—authenticity and regionality require a level of commitment that seldom comes cheap, and for

good reason. A juicy heirloom in the summer will cost a lot more than the tennis balls that pass for tomatoes in the grocery store.

For all those reasons, I've been a sap for Zinfandel since I moved to Sonoma County 30 years ago. It fits all my parameters: The price is fair, it's grown for miles around me, and it's the "real thing," California's historic and signature grape.

A wine I tasted this past year epitomized all of that for me: Easton Zinfandel Amador County 2015 (92 points, \$22). Vibrant and sleek, yet plump with dense, ripe fruit, the wine offers briary black raspberry, smoked pepper and wild sweet anise flavors that stretch out on a zesty finish. What's more, it features lively acidity that keeps it snappy and light on its feet.

Bill Easton is the man behind the Zinfandel. Easton, 66, has more than 30 years under his winemaking belt in the small Sierra Foothills community of Plymouth, Calif. There, he produces two separate labels. For the Easton brand, he makes five different Zinfandels as well as Sauvignon Blanc, Barbera and occasionally Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. The Terre Rouge label focuses on Rhône-style red and white wines.

Hailing from nearby Sacramento, Easton inherited his passion for Zin from his father, who drank old-school wines from the likes of Joseph Swan and Ridge. When the superripe monster Zins became fashionable in the late 1970s, Easton noticed something. The wines fell apart in the bottle after a few years in the cellar.

That was a lesson Easton took to heart when he started making Zin. His wines seldom venture past 14.5 percent alcohol and retain a bright level of acidity. "Zinfandel up here, if it's made the right way, they're like Piedmontese reds," Easton says.

The Amador County Zinfandel is among Easton's most widely available wines, with 6,200 cases made in 2015. A modest percentage of estate fruit goes into the bottling, with the rest supplied by growers with 40- to 100-year-old vineyards, typically dry-farmed and head-pruned.

Easton had a specific goal when he started making the wine 20 years ago. "We wanted to make something that was a bit more accessible and that restaurants could pour by the glass," he says. "We also wanted a wine that reflects the personality of the region."

And that it does, year after year, particularly in 2015, and it also reflects all those old-fashioned values I grew up with in the Midwest. And remarkably, for just \$22.