

## ZINFANDELS OF THE ESCHEN AND ESOLA VINEYARDS

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Most California wine enthusiasts are well acquainted with the "discovery" of Amador County Zinfandel by Sacramento merchant Darrell Corti after tasting one of home winemaker Charlie Myers' wines. The big Deaver Vineyard Zinfandel produced by Sutter Home in 1968 defined the genre of Amador-style Zinfandels which have since followed that success.

Less familiar are some of the outstanding Zinfandels lately produced from the Amador vineyards of Chester Eschen and Ernest Esola by Carneros Creek, Mount Veeder, and Ridge wineries. This article examines in depth the background of these wines and attempts to characterize some of their stylistic features.

### The Grapes

The gently rolling foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains in Amador County with its red decomposed granite soil make up one of the most unique grape growing regions in California, if not the world. The area is officially classified as a warm Region III- cool Region IV by the UC Davis degree- days classification scheme, roughly equivalent to Lodi in the Central Valley. But this classification is deceptive.

Cool Spring weather significantly delays bud break in Amador County compared with coastal growing areas. The temperatures during the final ripening phase can often be quite high, resulting in a rise in sugar level of several degrees Brix in one day. This abbreviated, intense growing season is generally regarded elsewhere as inimical to production of fine wines, producing high sugar- low acid grapes.

Such is not the case in Amador. Cold air flows down from the Sierra Nevadas nightly, keeping the average temperature sufficiently low to maintain high acidity levels.

Even more important is the low humidity that characterizes Amador. Bunch rot is virtually never a problem. Furthermore, once the grapes reach 25° or 26° Brix, they begin to dehydrate, but not raisen. This has much the same effect as dehydration from botrytis (without the corresponding chemical and flavor changes), concentrating the sugar, acidity, and flavors. For example, the Esola grapes in 1978 came into Carneros Creek Winery with the incredible figures of:

Sugar: 31.5° Brix,



Total acidity: 0.80 gm/ 100 ml,

pH: 3.28 .

Ernest Esola has even seen grapes in his vineyard as high as 37° Brix, yet still perfectly sound.

### The Vineyards

The Eschen Ranch near Fiddletown was purchased in 1972 by Chester Eschen. It totals 83 acres, with 50 acres in grapes. The majority (40 acres) is Zinfandel with the remainder being Mission (5-6 acres), Muscat, and Black Muscat.

The vineyard was planted in 1924 (during the height of Prohibition) by a man named Ostron and worked with mules for many years. About two thirds of the vines are planted on grafted rootstock, the remainder being on their own roots; phylloxera not being a problem in Amador. The vines are trained by the old Italian-style head pruning method rather than more productive cane pruning. This keeps the yield down around 2 to 2 1/2 tons/acre (dropping to less than 1 ton/acre in 1977 due to the drought). No irrigation is used.

A number of home winemakers have been purchasing Eschen grapes for many years. Until recently, most of the grapes went to East-Side Winery in Lodi for their jug blends. In 1972 and 1973, the grapes went to Robert Mondavi Winery. Since 1974, the Zinfandel grapes have gone to Carneros Creek and Ridge. The other varieties presently go to Shenandoah Vineyards.

About a mile to the west, as the crow flies, across a ridge of hills, lies the Esola Vineyard in the Shenandoah Valley, near the town of Plymouth. The ranch came into the Esola family in 1910, the grapes being planted shortly thereafter. The property is presently owned by brothers John and Ernest, with Ernest and his wife, Lena d'Agostini Esola, responsible for its operation.

The Esolas have about 90 acres under vines, mostly to Zinfandel. They also have about 7 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, 7 acres of Sauvignon Blanc, and an acre or so of Mission and Barbera.

The Zinfandel is more than 70 years old, originating from cuttings obtained locally. The Mission and Barbera are 20 years old, and the Cabernet and Sauvignon Blanc a youthful 15 years. The vines are all head pruned. The original Zin is on its own roots with the recent plantings being grafted vines on St. George rootstock. The vineyard is dry-farmed, although several wells were sunk in 1977 to sustain their drought-starved vines.



The authenticity of the Sauvignon Blanc is somewhat clouded, the vines not coming from certified nursery stock. Bob Plaister, agricultural extension agent for Amador County, identifies Montevina as the only bearing acreage of that variety in the County and disclaims any knowledge of the exact variety of the white grapes on the Esola property. Nonetheless, Lena Esola states that the vines are definitely Sauvignon Blanc. At any rate, cognizant of the white wine boom, the Esolas plan to put in another 1000 such vines this year.

For many years, the Esolas hauled their grapes down to Oakland for the home winemaking trade. The Barbera and Mission still go to these customers. In 1974 and 1975, they sold their Zin to Carneros Creek, Mount Veeder, and Ridge. Since 1976, they have been split between Carneros Creek and Ridge. Starting in 1974, all the Cabernet has gone to Carneros Creek. In 1978, the Sauvignon Blanc went to Caymus Vineyards for their Sauvignon Blanc wine.

#### The Amador-style Zinfandel

The string of successful Zinfandels produced by Sutter Home from 1968 thru 1972 defined the style of Amador County Zinfandels: big, heavy, tannic, intensely fruity, rather alcoholic wines. These wines display, to varying degrees, a unique smell and flavor often described as Amador dusty-briary, found in no other Zinfandel produced in California.

In 1972, Mayacamas Vineyards produced the first of the Late Harvest Amador Zinfandels, a huge tannic wine at 17.5% alcohol, but still showing the Amador flavor. Since 1973, the Sutter Home Zins have tended towards a lighter, more drinkable style of wine and lack the power of earlier editions. Charlie Myers continues his original style of Amador Zinfandel from Deaver vineyard grapes, now under his Harbor Winery label.

The Amador-style Zin is probably best exemplified by those of Cary Gott's Montevina since 1974. His regular and Special Select Zins display a huge, intense, usually alcoholic style which oftentimes belies their early drinkability.

Yet even within the context of Amador-style Zinfandels, the wines all display distinct shades of differences, reflecting both the differing microclimates within Amador from which the grapes originate and also the winemaker's stylistic intent. Just as with Napa Valley Cabernet, Amador Zins are not all stamped from the same mold.

### Carneros Creek Winery

Frank Mahoney, winemaker at Carneros Creek Winery near Napa, purchased his first Zinfandel grapes in 1973 from the Eschen Ranch. Since 1974, he has purchased Zinfandel from both the Eschen and Esola vineyards.

Mahoney's interest is primarily in Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon, using the Amador Zinfandels to "fill up the cracks" in his operation. The quality of his Zinfandels clearly belies his disinterest.

Mahoney does nothing particularly different with his Amador wines. They are fermented at about 85° F in stainless steel after inoculation with a pure yeast strain, on the skins for 8-11 days and pressed at about 3° sugar, and matured in American oak for slightly more than a year. Sometimes they go through the malolactic fermentation and sometimes not, the Esola being more prone to a malolactic than the Eschen.

Even when the grapes come in at nearly the same sugar/acid levels, the wines from the two vineyards are distinctly different. Mahoney finds a slightly greater richness in the Esola that's not in the Eschen. He contrasts the Esola and Eschen with the same stylistic differences of Chateau Palmer and Chateau Montrose.

The 1973 Carneros Creek Eschen Zinfandel was probably the lightest Amador Zin Mahoney has produced, reflecting the unusually high yield of that year. The two '74 Zins illustrate near-perfect growing conditions; big wines at about 14 1/2 % alcohol, both harvested at nearly the same sugar/acid levels. The long cool growing season and the large crop load in 1975 produced two less ripe Zins at about 12 1/2 % alcohol.

In 1976, a storm coming up from Southern California panicked the Eschen pickers to harvest early at about 21° Brix. Esola decided to wait out the storm but it stopped short of his vineyard. Unfortunately, the pickers had left the county and by the time he had regrouped them, his Zinfandel was up to 27 1/2 ° Brix and rising rapidly.

Mahoney produced three different Amador Zins from those grapes. The first Amador County Zin was a blend of the under-ripe Eschen grapes and the least over-ripe Esola grapes, at 13.3% alcohol. The Lot II Amador County Zin was about 20% Eschen and 80% Esola; a bigger, richer wine at 14.8% alcohol. And, finally, an Amador County Late Picked Zin was produced from 32° Brix Esola grapes, fermenting out to 16.7% alcohol.

The two 1977 Eschen and Esola Zins came in at a reasonable sugar level, fermenting out to around 14% alcohol. But the severe drought cut the yield down below one ton/acre, producing two rather intensely flavored wines.

The 1978 harvest again proved to be problematic. The Eschen grapes came in at 23.8° Brix and fermented out dry. Mahoney feels this wine is more rounded and less astringent than is typical for the Eschen wines, perhaps even his best Amador Zin yet. The Esola came in at 31.5° Brix. In the Fall of 1979, it was still fermenting slowly at about 4° Brix and over 15% alcohol. Mahoney tried a test batch of Port but was unhappy with the result; the wine had already fermented out too much sugar. He's not certain what kind of wine his '78 Esola will ultimately become.

Because of the heat wave ripening everything at once and insufficient fermenting capacity, Carneros Creek was unable to take the Esola Zinfandel grapes in 1979 at the time they reached acceptable sugar levels. The Eschen grapes came into the winery earlier at 24.8° Brix and Mahoney characterizes them as the best looking grapes he's seen yet from the Eschen vineyard.

The Carneros Creek Amador Zins are not the typical Amador-style Zinfandel. Although they are usually dark intense Amador-flavored Zins with a slight oak component, they are much like the Clos du Val Zins; big intense wines with a distinct elegance and breed. Certainly, they cannot be characterized as heavy-handed and clumsy.

Mahoney professes a dislike for the high alcohol Late Harvest style of Zinfandel and does not make them by design. He feels that as these wines age and lose their fruit, the alcohol overwhelms any complexity and simply adds to the dumbness of the wine.

#### Ridge Vineyards

Paul Draper, winemaker at Ridge Vineyards, made their first Amador Zinfandels in 1974. The Eschen Ranch was labeled Fiddletown. The Shenandoah contained mostly grapes from the Esola vineyard with small amounts from the Storey vineyard and a third nearby Amador vineyard.

Ridge treats their Amador Zins in much the same way as other Zinfandels. Fermentation is in stainless steel with a unique submerged cap, using the natural fermentative yeasts present on the grapes. Fermentation is initiated by the species *Kloeckera* up to about 6% alcohol. At this point, the fermentation is carried briefly by the species *Hansenula*, immediately followed by the traditional *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* var. *ellipsoideus* (the strain most wineries inoculate with) until fermentation is completed. This fermentation chain is identical to that found in Bordeaux where use of the natural yeasts is a much more widespread practice. Although Ridge is one of a very few California wineries using the natural fermentative yeasts (others being Congress



Springs, Santa Cruz Mountain, and d'Agostini in Amador County), Draper discounts this as being a significant factor in their wines. The fermentation is on the skins for 9-12 days, essentially until dryness.

The Ridge Amador Zinfandels have thus far always gone through a malolactic fermentation. No fining or filtration is done unless absolutely necessary for bottle stability. Maturation is in American oak for about a year and a half. Clarification is done by careful racking every four months. Draper credits the malolactic and their cellar treatment as the most important factors in the making of their Amador Zins, feeling this results in a more complex and refined wine.

Draper likewise finds the Eschen and Esola grapes to give distinctly different wines. He finds more richness and fruit intensity in the Shenandoah and a harder, more tannic, more backward when young, wine in the Fiddletown.

Draper admits to having little fondness for the typical intense, alcoholic Amador-style Zinfandel, feeling the wines are clumsy and one-dimensional. The Ridge Amador Zins clearly reflect his dislike for that style. The grapes are harvested earlier than normal (for Amador) to make what Ridge terms a "claret" style wine, a wine less intensely fruity and lower in alcohol than typical for Amador-style Zinfandel.

The two '74 Zins fermented out to 14 1/2 % alcohol, rather substantial for the "claret" style Draper espouses. For the '75, '76, and '77, Ridge was able to keep the alcohol down to lower levels, ranging from about 12% to almost 14%.

The exception was the Esola grapes in 1976 which, like at Carneros Creek, came in at very ripe levels. Ridge designated the resulting wine as their 1976 Late Harvest Zinfandel. The majority of it was released as Late Harvest II, at 15.4% alcohol. Seven barrels of the wine made from somewhat riper grapes were given longer aging and will be released in the Fall of 1979 as Late Harvest I.

Having done the experiment with the '75 thru '77 Zins, Draper has modified his philosophy towards the wines somewhat. He now feels the Amador grapes are best harvested slightly over-ripe, around 25° Brix, to produce a wine of about 14% alcohol, more along the lines of the '74's. Reflecting this change in technique, Draper feels his '78 Fiddletown (Eschen), at about 15% alcohol, is his best effort yet with Amador grapes. Like Carneros Creek, his '78 Shenandoah (Esola) grapes came in very ripe. There are presently three distinct batches, two of which are still fermenting in early Fall of 1979. Disliking Zinfandels with slight

residual sugar, Draper has not yet decided the eventual fate of this wine.

Ridge established its reputation among California wine enthusiasts in the late '60's and very early '70's with its huge, intense, tannic Zinfandels. The 1970 Jimsomare and Occidental wines probably best typify this winemaking style. Since the mid-1970's, there has been grumbling among some Ridge aficionados about the trend of recent Ridge Zins towards a lighter, less alcoholic and intense style of wine. It seems clear that there has been a gradual change in the style of their wines, but certainly no lowering of the quality.

Draper contends that the aim of Ridge has not changed at all. He feels the so-called "old-style" Ridge wines were sometimes too one-dimensional and did not always develop the desired complexity with bottle age. He states a preference for making the darkest and most tannic wines that the grapes will give, but not at the expense of the complexity in the wine.

#### Mount Veeder Winery

Mike Bernstein, owner and winemaker at Mount Veeder Winery near Napa, purchased Esola grapes in both 1974 and 1975, primarily because of a lack of Napa Zinfandel grapes of comparable quality. Since Ridge and Carneros Creek established a contract with Esola in 1976, he has not had access to these grapes. Beginning with the 1977 crush, he has two acres of his own Zinfandel vines bearing upon Mount Veeder. His '78 is a big, Late Harvest style wine at 17.2% alcohol and 0.6% residual sugar.

Bernstein's winemaking has few significant differences from Carneros Creek's or Ridge's. Fermentation is in stainless steel with frequent pumping over the cap, on the skins until dryness. Both vintages were put through a malolactic with the idea of obtaining more complexity and perhaps better bottle development. However, unlike Ridge and Carneros Creek, barrel aging for about a year and a half is done in French Nevers oak.

The Mount Veeder's are probably the closest of the three to the typical Amador-style Zinfandel, but stylistically more akin to Carneros Creek than Ridge. The wines are normally more intense and tannic than Mahoney's, with a more distinct oak component. And, like Carneros Creek, they display an elegance and class not often found in Amador Zins.

### The '74 and '75 Wines

The Los Alamos wine tasting group recently held a tasting of all the 1974 and 1975 Zinfandels from the Esola and Eschen vineyards. At four and five years of age, these wines have matured sufficiently to give some indication of how these styles of Amador Zins age. No attempt was made to obtain the usually meaningless consensus ranking of the wines. My tasting notes and comments follow:

#### Ridge

Fiddletown 1975: Medium color, soft light spicy-oaky nose, very tart light spicy hard flavor, short spicy finish with somewhat sour aftertaste, slight tannin and at or beyond its peak, more berry-like and less Amador-like than the Shenandoah '75.

Shenandoah 1975: Medium color, strong berry-dusty-perfumey nose, soft spicy-dusty-cherry flavors, long soft spicy-earthy finish with slight tannin, nearing its peak.

Fiddletown 1974: Medium color, strong spicy-cherry-perfumey- horse collar complex nose, well glycerined, soft spicy floral developed flavors, medium soft spicy complex finish with little tannin, near its peak.

Shenandoah 1974: Medium-light color, soft spicy - perfumed talcum powder slightly oaky nose, soft rich intense fruit and Amador dusty flavors, well glycerined, long soft spicy dusty developed finish, slight tannin but nearing its peak.

#### Carneros Creek

Eschen 1975: Medium-dark color, intense chocolate slightly oaky-alcoholic nose, rough Amador dusty-cherry flavor, medium tannic cherry-salami finish, needs a year or two yet.

Esola 1975: Dark color, intense chocolate-cherry Amador Zin nose, soft rich spicy Amador dusty flavor, soft rich spicy dusty slightly stemmy finish, slight tannin but nearing its peak, softer richer more Amador dusty than the Eschen '75.

Eschen 1974: Medium-dark color, strong spicy perfumey cherry slightly stemmy nose, soft light spicy Amador dusty flavor, light tart some-tannic finish, nearing its peak, harder and more austere than the Esola '74.

Esola 1974: Ullaged to the sholder, medium-dark color, light fruity developed tobacco cigar-box complex nose, soft spicy cigar-box cedary slightly rough flavor, medium light developed



spicy finish, little tannin and at or beyond its peak, a nicely developed complex wine.

#### Mount Veeder

Esola 1975: Dark color, intense Amador-dusty spicy-salami nose, heavy intense tannic earthy cherry somewhat dusty flavor, medium dusty-cherry oaky finish with some tannin, may improve some yet, lacks the roundness and balance of the '74.

Esola 1974: Dark color, intense minty pencil shavings somewhat oaky nose, heavy body, rich oaky minty intense fruit flavor with little Amador dust, medium minty-oaky-cherry finish, some tannin and needs several years yet, seems the youngest of all the wines.

Esola 1974 (American oak): Dark color, strong spicy perfumey cinammon nose much different from the French oak but not easily identifiable as American oak, seems harder, more tannic, more Amador-style and less complex than the French oak.

Of the Ridge's, the Fiddletown '74 was the clear favorite. When the two '74's were first tasted by our group shortly after their release in early 1976, the disappointment in the wines was virtually unanimous. Most people had expected wines displaying a unique combination of the "old-style" Ridge power and the Amador-style brawn. The wines seemed light, the slight amount of fruit intensity covered by the American oak, lacking in Amador character, and low tannin levels that indicated little aging potential. The '75's a year later merely reinforced this gloomy conclusion.

Expecting somewhat enfeebled, over-aged wines in this tasting, nearly all tasters were amazed at the wonder 3 1/2 years of bottle age had wrought on these wines. The '74's were two of the best examples of mature, developed Zinfandels we have tasted. The complexity and refinement Draper strives for in the Ridge wines had indeed appeared.

Among the Carneros Creeks, the '74 Esola appeared to be the choice of most tasters, with little preference among the other three. When this wine was first tasted shortly after its release, it was a big black tannic Zinfandel for which many predicted a very long life. It, too, had developed very nicely into a complex and refined wine, but much earlier than most had expected. Perhaps the excessive bottle leakage was responsible for its early maturity.

Of the Mount Veeder's, the '74 was easily most preferred; although Bernstein seemed to have extracted more from the 1975 grapes than did



Carneros Creek or Ridge. The two oaks produced quite distinct wines, but there was no clear preference between the two.

Both Draper's and Mahoney's characterization of the Esolas as possessing more richness and fruit was borne out in the tasting, although this difference seems to decrease as the wines age. As expected, the '74's were universally preferred over the '75's.

Among all the wines, there was a nearly even split between the Ridge Fiddletown '74, Carneros Creek Esola '74, and Mount Veeder '74. The choice was based more on stylistic preferences than on any perceived quality factors. All of the wines were fine examples of California Zinfandels, but distinctly not "typical" Amador-style Zinfandels.