

Zinfully zumptuous zinfandels

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It is difficult not to admire the passion with which Rolf Zeitvogel approaches the business of making zinfandel. The single biggest producer of this capricious varietal in South Africa, Rolf presented his annual International Zinfandel Tasting recently at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Granger Bay.

The line-up this year presented some of the best zinfandels from Australia, four in total, lined up against the stalwart 2011 Blaauwklippen Zinfandel Reserve Single Vineyard.

We were privileged to taste from Cape Mentelle (Margaret River), Smallwater Wines (Geographic Region) and Peel Estate (Peel Region) in Western Australia, all cool climate wines from vineyards close to the Indian Ocean.

The fourth wine, from Cargo Road Wines (Orange Region) in New South Wales, a distance inland from the ocean, is grown in a vineyard at 860m above sea level – so presumably what is lost in distance from the ocean, is compensated for by the coolness of altitude.

All the wines demonstrated the characteristic rich fruit opulence: raisins, Christmas cake mix, cherries, plums, tobacco, in varying combinations and intensities, with fruit sweetness a consistent feature.

Alcohols ranged from a low 14.5% (Cape Mentelle) to a surprisingly high 17.5% (Peel Estate), which would place it outside of the SAWIS alcohol limit of 16.5% for



■ Rolf Zeitvogel, of Blaauwklippen Estate in Stellenbosch, and the uncrowned king of zinfandel in SA – at the International Zinfandel Tasting at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Granger Bay. Pictured, right, are the wines.

natural wine. But bigger alcohol is a common characteristic of zinfandel, and provided the wine is in balance, it is unlikely to present as unpleasant – unless, of course, that characteristic “alcohol heat” in the back of the throat bothers you.

The problem in a world hankering after lower alcohol wines for health and driving reasons, is that such alcohol bombs are increasingly losing favour with some wine drinkers. Rolf’s 2011 Blaauwklippen Zinfandel Reserve came in a reasonably respectable 15.97%.

Although a couple of the wines – Cape Mentelle and Smallwater –

demonstrated a degree of elegance; the wines were generally big, full-bodied and opulent, which are characteristics you either love or hate as a wine drinker, and to enjoy zinfandel, you need to love them.

That zinfandel lends itself to drinking with food is undeniable. With the exception of white zinfandel, which amounts to a Blanc de Noir made from zinfandel fruit, the average zinfandel, irrespective of where it is grown, is not the kind of wine you quaff around the swimming pool.

And this is something Rolf emphasises whenever he talks

about zinfandel, his and others.

The superb lunch which followed the formal tasting, prepared by the Radisson’s exec chef Grant Kennedy, perfectly showcased the surprising range of zinfandels Rolf makes at Blaauwklippen.

The amuse bouche of beef and dried apricot carpaccio, emerald asparagus, and pomegranate hollandaise gratin was accompanied by the palest pink 2012 Blaauwklippen White Zin, crisp and clean, with lively fruit and racy acidity.

The pink tuna pavé starter with gremolata fresh herb crumb, root bulb dauphinoise, cranberry

beurre noisette and crunchy runner bean shoots, sat comfortably alongside Rolf’s 2010 Blaauwklippen Zinfandel.

The amazing “journey of duck” three part main course – leg confit with gooseberry jelly, thigh and goats curd samosa with liver parfait, slow-grilled breast – accompanied by naartjie la orange jus, quinoa and wild mushroom, braised baby onions and glazed vanilla carrots, showed of Rolf’s exquisite Blaauwklippen 2011 Zinfandel Reserve, in the unanimous opinion of the assembled company, the absolute star of the zinfandel show.

And just to show how versatile zinfandel is, Rolf has made a noble late harvest.

To finish off our sumptuous repast, we enjoyed raisin tea and rooibos bread and butter soufflé, a sensational avocado and bitter chocolate tart (tasting avocado in a chocolate pud is entirely counterintuitive but really lovely), and a coconut blackberry semi fredo. All were perfectly supported by the 2011 Blaauwklippen Zinfandel Noble Late Harvest, which is like drinking a liquid dessert.

As the conversation around the lunch table unfolded, ranging from a dissection of the wines we had tasted earlier, to the intricacies of the viticultural practices needed to get the best out of zinfandel, the memory of each course and how they paired so magnificently with each of Rolf’s wines, reinforced Rolf Zeitvogel’s status as the uncrowned king of South African zinfandel.