The International Wine Review
September 2005
Report #1 California Petite Sirahs

The International Wine Review is a new online wine publication for wine distributors, retailers, restaurants, hotels, sommeliers, wine media, practicing wine professionals, and others deeply involved in wine.

The IWR publishes in-depth reports on selected premium grape varieties from around the world. The reports offer:

- expert tasting notes and ratings for the best wines categorized by three tiers: entry level, mid level, and high end wines
- an examination of the various styles of wine being made
- analyses of the impact of site, grape growing and winemaking
- advice and recommendations regarding marketing and sales

The IWR’s Report #1 on “California’s Petite Sirahs” is being sent to you in hard copy with our compliments.

Look for these future reports:

- Grenache-based wines of Spain, Australia, France, and other regions
- Touriga Nacional and the wines of Portugal
- Pinot Grigio-Pinot Gris
- California Syrahs
- Malbecs from Argentina, Cahors, and elsewhere
- Grüner Veltliner

Producers, importers, and distributors who wish to have their wines included in future tastings are invited to contact the publishers at info@iwinereview.com

The publishers welcome feedback and recommendations from readers on improving the content and usefulness of these reports.

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Jay Youmans, MW
Publishers, International Wine Review

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Introduction

This first International Wine Review Report focuses on California Petite Sirah. Despite being a work horse grape in many blends in California, playing a supporting role for many great Zinfandels, bolstering some great Cabernet Sauvignons, and making some phenomenal wines on its own, Petite Sirah is not well known and continues to be one of the most underrated grapes grown in California.

There are currently 5,500 acres in California planted with Petite Sirah, tiny by comparison with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and other major grape varieties. Despite this, there are 248 producers of Petite Sirah in California and a growing following of enthusiastic consumers. The grape is also fiercely beloved by many winemakers who belong to a society that promotes Petite Sirah known as “PS I Love You.” (http://www.psiloveyou.org).

Petite Sirah has maintained a loyal cult following over the years, owing to the enthusiastic support of producers such as Foppiano, Concannon, Stag’s Leap, and Bogle, to name but a few. However, Petite Sirah is generally under the radar screen of the wine trade and the serious wine enthusiast. It is for this reason the IWR Tasting Panel set out to assess the quality of a select group of Petite Sirahs currently being produced in California. Our goal was also to identify the styles of Petite Sirah being produced, assess the quality-price ratios, and to provide readers an overview of the grape that will help enhance its appreciation.

The IWR Tasting

Our tasting included samples of 35 Petite Sirahs selected from among the 248 producers making Petite Sirah in California. Most of the wines in our tasting are from producers located in Napa Valley and Sonoma; however, the wines were also sourced from wineries/vineyards in Mendocino, Santa Barbara, Clarksburg, and the Central Coast. A wide variety of producers with small and medium-sized vineyards (e.g. Hayne, Frediani, Bacualupi) were also included.

According to IWR practice, the bottlings were selected from within three price ranges: Entry Level $15 and below, Medium-Priced $15-$40, and High-End $40 and above. The IWR would like to thank the many wineries, distributors, and retailers, for contributing samples and making this tasting possible. In particular, special thanks go out to Jo Diaz, Executive Director, PS I Love You, The Country Vintner, Vinum Ventures, Inc., and the Vineyard, a retail store located in McLean, VA.

IWR tastings are conducted by an independent panel of tasters. The tasting panel is recruited by the publishers of IWR from among experienced sommeliers, wine writers, wine retailers, and other members of the trade. The panel for this tasting consisted of: Caterina Abbruzzetti, Wine Director, 2941 Restaurant, Falls Church, VA, Jim Arsenault, the Vineyard in McLean, Ed Fabian, Total Wines and More, Michael Potashnik, Publisher, International Wine Review and Virginia Wine Guide, and Jay Youmans, MW and Publisher, International Wine Review.

The tasting was held at the elegant 2941 Restaurant in Falls Church, Virginia. Logistical support for the tasting was provided by Mark and Jeanie Golub. The wines were opened two hours in advance of the tasting, placed in flights by price level and tasted blind. Each taster prepared tasting notes on the wines and rated them using the IWR's 100 point system. The ratings are as follows:

- ★★★ Highly Recommended 90-100 points
- ★★★ Very Good 85-90 points
- ★★ Good 80-85 points

The IWR's tasting notes and ratings appear in the final section of this report.

The Results

The main conclusions from our tasting are as follows:

First, the perception that Petite Sirah is a minor grape is unjustified. Petite Sirah should be taken more seriously by the trade and wine consumers. Hopefully this report will help contribute to a better appreciation of these wines. Education and promotion are essential to enhancing the marketability of this unique grape.

Second, there are a wide range of prevailing styles. Petite Sirah can be tannic, full bodied, tough and chewy, inky-black in color. These styles vary based on vine age, crop levels, vineyard composition, and site selection. Flavor descriptors range from blueberry to blackberry to intense black raspberry. Better examples exude spicy notes with cracked black pepper.
The spectrum can range from fruit forward and simple, to dense, complex and exotic. Petite Sirah often has a longer finish than most California Syrah, more fruit than Cabernet Sauvignon, and more complexity and balance than Zinfandel. Our tasting showed that many of these Petite Sirahs possess more “Australia Shiraz” characteristics than do most California Syrah/Shiraz. We, therefore, consider Petite Sirah to be the equal of these other grapes in terms of the quality of wine its produces.

Third, stylistic differences are difficult to attribute to individual California AVA, American Viticultural Area. Despite the often heard assertion that the Petite Sirahs from the Calistoga area are distinct and identifiable, our tasting was unable to confirm this assertion. While the wineries in the Calistoga area are, indeed, producing very fine Petite Sirah, there were no discernable differences between the taste profiles of these wines and the other wines in the tasting. Winemaking, wine age, and vineyard composition, rather than terroir or site, appear to be the dominant factor defining the stylistic differences among these wines.

Fourth, many California producers are making outstanding wine from Petite Sirah. These wines offer excellent quality and immense pleasure for the money. There appears to be a close correlation between quality and price. In summary:

- The larger producers of Petite Sirah provide ripe, fresh blueberry and blackberry fruit-packed wines that are ready to drink. The wines are generally fruit forward and delicious. Many of the wines possess a luscious texture with well rounded, ripe tannins. Priced at under $15, these wines are a bargain. Affordable for daily consumption and generally yielding better value than many commercially made Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or Syrah.

- As you would expect, the Petite Sirahs available at the mid-price range are generally more complex than those at the entry level. While they offer scents of blackberries and blueberries, they also reveal black pepper and nuances of earth, leather, chocolate and toast, along with solid tannins for aging. Our panel was very impressed with the high quality of these wines. Priced generally at between $15 and $40, they represent outstanding value for the discerning wine enthusiast.

- At the higher price level, the wines are usually vineyard designated. Although they were distinctive wines, it was difficult to identify a commonality among the wines of the same AVA, except perhaps the wines from the Rockpile AVA. The dominant influences appear to be winemaking, vine age, clones, and vineyard composition (field blends), rather than a particular AVA. Sophisticated and elegant, these wines are produced in small quantities, and mainly sold directly to buyers, on mailing lists, willing to pay up to $75 a bottle.

Lastly, the IWR wholeheartedly recommends that members of the wine trade and discerning consumers take a closer look at and learn more about Petite Sirah. Given the high quality of the wines tasted in this report, and their excellent price-quality ratios, there should be many new converts to these wines, if promoted actively by distributors and retailers.

The rest of this report provides useful background information about Petite Sirah and a set of tasting notes to orient your future tastings. Further information about Petite Sirah can also be obtained on the web from the PS I Love You website http://www.psiloveyou.org or from the individual wineries.

Background on the Grape

Until recently, much like that of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah had a mysterious past and unknown ancestry. This, however, was finally solved in 2003. In the 1870’s a French nurseryman, Dr. François Durif crossed Syrah and Peloursin, developing a new grape variety called Durif. Dr. Durif knew that a new vine had been created in his nursery as the result of the crossing of two varietals, but he didn’t know the pollen source at the time. A grape cross occurs when the flower of the “mother” vine comes in contact with pollen from the “father” vine. Today, we now know that the pollen source was indeed Syrah.

Dr. Durif was attempting to develop a grape variety that was resistant to powdery mildew, a common problem in southern France. But the grape’s compact clusters made this variety susceptible to a different problem: bunch rot. This problem offset the value of its mildew-free attributes. As a result, Durif was never able to produce consistent, high quality wines in the growing conditions of southern France.

In 1884, however, Durif was introduced into California where it thrived. The warmer, drier growing conditions offset the problems posed by its tight clusters. Plantings of Durif spread quickly. Later it would become known as Petite Sirah. The ATTF now recognizes both names for Federal label approval. By the turn of the century, Petite Sirah rivaled the two most popular wine grapes of the time, Zinfandel and Mourvedre (or Mataro), in terms of acreage. Petite Sirah became commonly used in “Burgundy” blends, prior to the advent of varietally labeled wine. In the 1930’s there were nearly 7,500 acres of Petite Sirah in California, and by 1976, total acreage had peaked at around 14,000 acres. Petite Sirah was booming.
Then, Petite Sirah became one of the first victims of the onslaught of international grape varieties. Fashion in wine began to change. Varietally labeled wine began to wax, and generic blends began to wane. Grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon began to displace Petite Sirah in the counties of Sonoma, Napa, and Monterey. By 1990, California Petite Sirah plantings had dwindled to a mere 1,400 acres.

Only recently, through DNA fingerprinting, was Dr. Carole Meredyth, formerly of UC Davis, able to confirm that 90% of the Petite Sirah planted in California today is in fact Durif. Much of the other 10% is largely Peloursin, which is nearly identical to Durif. Many older Petite Sirah vineyards commonly consist of field blends containing Alicante Bouchet, Carignane, Mourvedre (Mataro), Grenache, Zinfandel, and even Mondeuse.

**Petite Sirah in the Vineyard**

As one enthusiastic winemaker has said, “The beautiful thing about Petite Sirah is that it takes advantage of California’s attributes: sunshine and dry summers. It is the most delicious grape in the vineyard.”

Petite Sirah routinely yields between four to seven tons per acre, with older plantings producing between 1-2 ½ tons per acre. It is a mid-season ripener, performing best on deeper soils with gravelly-loam bench land sites employing cordon training. Head pruned vines, found mainly on ‘old vines’ can achieve great results on shallow soils.

Because of the tight clusters, Petite Sirah is subject to bunch rot when damp conditions or rain occurs. This, however, does not usually present a problem in California. Petite Sirah is also susceptible to leaf roll and corky bark viruses. Petite Sirah vines are smaller than that of Syrah for example, and far less vigorous. The berries produced are smaller, and rounder and extremely high in polyphenolics, color and tannin. Petite Sirah is somewhat prone to sunburn.

DNA profiles have shown that much of California’s old-vine Petite Sirah vineyards contain various clones of Durif, and Peloursin. Much of the newly planted Petite Sirah in Napa appears to be Clone #3 which is available from UC Davis.

**Winemaking Challenges and Styles**

In the winery, the challenge in making high quality Petite Sirah is controlling the tannins. The key is to start with phenolically ripe fruit, where the stems, seeds, and pips are brown, rather than green. Use of multiple rackings, aeration pump-overs, and shorter macerations help control tannin.

Petite Sirah is often matured in American oak, while some winemakers feel that it benefits from a combination of French and American oak. The general feeling among winemakers is that Petite Sirah soaks up oak and can easily handle the more overt flavor often characteristic of American oak. Petite Sirah is prized as a blending grape for its deep color, and tannic structure. Petite Sirah is often chosen to blend into Zinfandel to add complexity, color, and body.

**Serving and Pairing with Food**

The key to serving Petite Sirah is to decant the wine, regardless of bottle age, prior to serving. Allow young wines to breath for two hours or more and older wines at least one hour.

Petite Sirah is enjoyable by itself, but is an ideal accompaniment to a variety of dishes. Not surprisingly, it pairs well with grilled or roast beef, pork, lamb or game, and their rich sauces. It also pairs well with rich flavorful stews and fatty meat dishes such as Osso Bocco.

**Tasting Notes**

**Entry Level $15 and below**

**Highly Recommended**

⭐⭐⭐ Concannon 2003 Petite Sirah Central Coast ($15.00)
Concannon has been producing high quality Petite Sirah for many years and this wine is no exception. The 2003 Petite Sirah is a blockbuster wine with a saturated purple color and brooding aromas of black currant fruit and savory spice. On the palate, this full-bodied offering reveals rather soft round blue and blackberry fruit, good acidity and length with some moderate aging potential. A dark beauty.

⭐⭐⭐ Pedroncelli 2001 Family Vineyards, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County ($14.50)
This outstanding offering from Pedroncelli reveals enticing dense black currant fruit and spice aromas on the nose and saturated black fruit flavors and wood spice on the palate. It is a medium bodied complex wine with exemplary fruit and oak integration, big rounded firm tannins, and a lovely long finish with grip. A remarkably complex wine with great aging potential.

[i-winereview.com](http://www.i-winereview.com) has allowed PS I Love You to highlight it’s members in this version. For the entire story, visit: [www.i-winereivew.com](http://www.i-winereivew.com)
Very Good
★★ Guenoc 2001 Petite Sirah North Coast ($13.00)
Guenoc’s Petite Sirah is medium bodied showing a young purple color and attractive aromas of berry fruit and vanilla. The palate exhibits lots of rich mulberry and blueberry fruit and chocolate notes that are beautifully integrated with oak. The tannins are also nicely rounded and provide a long smooth finish. A well made wine at a good price.

★★ Bogle 2003 Petite Sirah ($10.00)
Bogle first produced Petite Sirah in 1978. Fruit drawn from vineyards in Clarksburg and Lodi. Its 2003 Petite Sirah exhibits a medium purple color with moderate mulberry rhubarb and black fruit aromas that have a slightly stemmy character. In the mouth, the wine shows good overall fruit, supple tannins with a nice long finish.

★★ Foppiano 2003 Petite Sirah Russian River Valley Bacigalupi Vineyard ($18.00)
This light bodied purple colored wine exhibits luscious jammy blueberry and mulberry fruit flavors with tar and tea notes. On the palate, it reveals good fruit extraction with slight medicinal flavors, and a spicy finish with round tannins and a good grip.

Tasting Notes

Medium-Priced $20-$40

Highly Recommended

★★★ Marr Cellars 2002 Tehama Foothills ($27.00)
Bob Marr, owner and winemaker, has produced a dense rich deep purple stylish and fruit driven Petite Sirah. Highly extracted and flavorful, this bottling offers lots of blueberry fruit, pepper, smoked meat, spices and sweet oak. This is a big wine with big flavors and good grip. While approachable now, it should definitely improve with time in the bottle. Unfortunately, only 220 cases were made of this beauty.

★★★ Miro 2003 Creek Valley Coyote Ridge Vineyard ($30.00)
Miro Tcholakov, the talented Bulgarian winemaker, is producing some of the best Petit Sirah in Sonoma. He has won many awards as winemaker for Trentadue and during the last three years has been making wine under his own label. The Miro 2003 is a full-bodied dark purple and opaque colored bottling with rich blackberry and blueberry fruit aromas, leather, coffee, pepper and a good deal of oak and spice. On the fruity palate, if offers rich mouth feel, prominent oak and lots of tannins that would benefit from some cellar time.

★★★ Stags Leap Winery 2002 Petite Sirah, Napa Valley ($37.00)
Located in the Stag’s Leap District of Napa Valley, Stage Leap Winery has some of the earliest recognized plantings of Petite Sirah in California. The estate vineyards composed of rocky clay soils are 70 years old and produce black fruit. The 2002 Petite Sirah has a deep color, blackberry aroma and spice, elegant mouth feel with good extract balanced tannins and good acidity. It also has a long finish with peppery spices. The wine is aged in American oak for 19 months, and blended with small amounts of Rhone varietals, Syrah, Carignane, Viognier, and Grenache. The wine is still young and drinkable now, but will benefit from cellaring.

Very Good
★★ Foppiano Petite Sirah Russian River Valley Estate ($21.00)
This Russian River Valley estate grown bottling from Foppiano exhibits a dark opaque purple color and a spicy black peppery nose with sweet vanilla highlights. On the palate there is plenty of high quality richly extracted black currant and berry fruit, more pepper and more vanilla. This is a nicely made elegant wine showing excellent balance and a juicy finish. Needs 1-3 years minimum to show all of its stuff.
Silkwood 2002 Petite Sirah Stanislaus County ($36.00)
Silkwood Winery’s founder John Monnich has been dedicated to producing quality Petite Sirah for more than two decades. Utilizing fruit from Silkwood’s own vineyards in Stanislaus County, Monnich has produced a highly stylized bottling (including a velvet wine label) with an intriguing dark red color and a complex nose of black currant fruit, chocolate mint and smoke. Spending 19 months in neutral French oak barrels, this elegant medium bodied wine offers nicely extracted fruit intermixed with sweet oak, coffee and dark chocolate.

Trentadue 2003 La Storia Petite Sirah Alexander Valley ($NA)
The 2003 La Storia replaces Trentadue’s popular standard bearer, Estate Petite Sirah. Produced with fruit from the winery’s Alexander Valley estate, the La Storia is blended with about 16% Syrah and a small quantity of Zinfandel. The wine spends 16 months in 20% new European and French oak, the rest in old mixed European and American oak. This new bottling from winemaker Miro Tcholakov is a big wine displaying a dark purple color with black fruit and spicy white pepper notes on the nose. In the mouth, it is medium bodied offering nicely extracted fruit with more pepper, smoke and earthy notes and a healthy amount of rounded tannins that will benefit from some cellar time.

David Bruce 2003 Petite Syrah Central Coast ($20.00)
David Bruce’s flagship Petite Sirah is a delicious high styled wine. Produced for over two decades at a consistently high quality level, it possesses a medium dark purple color, and reveals light aromas of blueberry, mocha and spice. In the mouth it is elegant and silky smooth with clean berry fruit, light oak, and good balance. While not as extracted or as complex as other Petite Sirah bottlings, it is a wine of excellent quality, that is ready to drink, and offered at a highly competitive price.

Concannon Heritage Petite Sirah 2000 ($40.00)
Concannon’s Heritage Petite Sirah 2000 exemplifies this winery’s renewed commitment to high quality Petite Sirah. This bottling is made from new north-south oriented Petite plantings which receive equal sun exposure, cool evening airflows and meticulous vineyard management. It is a full-bodied dark purple opaque wine offering aromas of highly extracted fully ripened blackberry fruit, intermingled with earth, mint and oak notes. The palate is huge with densely fruited flavors and white pepper and has a long luscious finish with supple tannins and great aging potential, for at least a decade, if not more.

Lolonis 2002 Oprheus Petite Sirah Heritage Vineyards Redwood Valley ($40.00)
The estate grown Orpheus Petite Sirah is made from 55 year old dry farmed organically grown grapes. It exhibits a dense purple color, the rustic aromas of dense berry fruit from old vines, and loads of highly extracted sweet and spicy blueberry and mulberry fruit on the palate. This is a youthful wine with soft and supple tannins and a long finish. It is outstanding now, but will benefit from another 3-5 years of aging.

Rosenblum 2002 Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah Rockpile Road Vineyard, ($45.00)
Rosenblum Cellars currently produces three vineyard designated Petite Sirahs under Wine Director, Jeff Cohn. Each of these bottlings is distinctive and of a high quality. The 2002 Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah Rockpile Road Vineyard is one of three bottlings and is perhaps the highest in quality. Its fruit comes from a small hillside vineyard in the Rockpile AVA. It is fermented in small batches with yeasts isolated from the Northern and Southern Rhone, and aged in new oak barrels for 18 months. It is a rich and highly extracted wine opaque purple in color with aromas of black currant fruit, and notes of smoked meat, coffee and leather. It is medium weight offering crisp blackberry fruit on the palate with beautifully integrated oak and big ripe tannins. The wine has the potential to age for 10+ years and will need time to soften its tannins and develop its complex layers.

Tasting Notes

High-End $40 and above

Highly Recommended

Concannon Heritage Petite Sirah 2000 ($40.00)

Lolonis 2002 Oprheus Petite Sirah Heritage Vineyards Redwood Valley ($40.00)

Rosenblum 2002 Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah Rockpile Road Vineyard, ($45.00)