

YOU PROBABLY DRINK MORE PETITE SIRAH THAN YOU THINK.

By Korinne Munson



In California, to be labeled as a specific varietal, a wine needs to contain a minimum of 75 percent of the listed grape. Twenty-five percent of a blend can be “other” grapes, and if you’re drinking Syrah, Zinfandel, Merlot or even Cabernet Sauvignon, some of those “other” grapes may well be Petite Sirah. Petite Sirah is rich and full-bodied, packed with tannins and deep purple in color, so it’s often used to add structure and color to a blended wine.

It’s a common misconception that Petite Sirah is the same grape as Syrah, or just a type of Syrah. In French, the word “petite” means “little,” and so the name “little Sirah” certainly implies that the grapes are very similar—and there is, in fact, a direct family connection. But they’re two very different grapes. And despite its name, Petite Sirah is one big red.

In the 1970s, two French ampelographers (scientists who study grapevines), examined the Petite Sirah vines growing at UC Davis and determined they were the same grape as the French Durif. In 1996, Dr. Carole Meredith and her UC Davis colleagues used DNA comparisons to determine that Durif was actually the offspring of a cross-pollination between Peloursin and Syrah, both noble French varieties. So while California’s Petite Sirah (aka Durif) has a distinguished French pedigree, it’s a uniquely American grape. The first mentions of Petite Sirah (or “Pets,” as many grapegrowers and winemakers call it), in California wine literature date back to the 1880s. In the mid 1970s the grape reached its peak of approximately 14,000 acres in California, but by 1990, plantings had declined by 90 percent to a low of just 1,400 acres. The good news for enthusiasts, though, is that Petite Sirah has been making a slow-but-very-steady comeback for well over a decade.

It is, in fact, California’s “other” heritage grape. Zinfandel, especially in recent years, has become known as California’s heritage grape. It’s a distinctly American varietal with a long history of thriving here before international varieties like Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon became dominant. There was even a grassroots movement campaigning to make Zinfandel the official grape of California. But Petite Sirah was often planted in the field

blends right alongside Zinfandel. Aside from a long history in the United States, both Zinfandel and Petite Sirah share another important distinction: neither grape has a historical “home” outside of California.

The Bordeaux region of France is known for Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, while both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are undeniably tied to Burgundy. But Zinfandel and Petite Sirah flourished in California and weren’t really significant anywhere else. Even in California today, Petite Sirah doesn’t really have a region, the small amount of acreage it commands isn’t concentrated in any one area or appellation; rather, it’s scattered widely throughout the state with the most significant plantings in Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties as well as in Lodi, Paso Robles and Santa Barbara. The grape isn’t particularly easy to grow, and it’s susceptible to wet conditions, but winemakers are nevertheless finding it useful to give their reds a boost.

P.S. They love you

Six years ago, grapegrowers and winemakers, who are fans of Petite Sirah, formed an advocacy and marketing organization called P.S. I Love You. The group seeks to educate members of the wine trade, the press and consumers about what exactly Petite Sirah is and promote wines made from the varietal, similar to what ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates and Producers) has done for Zinfandel or the Rhone Rangers have done for Syrah and other varietals from the Rhone region of France. Jo Diaz, executive director of P.S. I Love You, says that, because so little was known about the grape, the first hurdle was educating the wine trade and press about what exactly Petite Sirah is. “Peloursin is the mother, and Syrah is the father,” says Diaz. “I usually ask people ‘Are you like your mom or your dad?’ Well, maybe a little of each, but you’re also very different.”

To get the message out that Petite Sirah was a unique American heritage grape, Diaz hit the road in a motorhome with Jim Concannon (of Livermore’s Concannon Vineyards) to conduct tastings and educational seminars for the wine trade and press in cities throughout the nation. The trip was sponsored by Concannon, but many P.S. I Love You members showed up to lend support in each city. Every year since its founding,

P.S. I Love You has also sponsored Foppiano Vineyards' Petite Sirah symposium, which is a forum for growers, producers and vintners to share information and best practices. The group has also been hard at work for the past few years creating a Petite Sirah heritage clone vineyard at UC Davis. Patty Bogle of Bogle Vineyards in Clarksburg has been a major force in making the vineyard, which is set to be planted this spring, a reality. Not only did Bogle donate \$30,000 in the project's first year, she's also worked closely with Dr. James Wolpert, chair of the Department of Viticulture & Enology at UC Davis, and viticultural researcher Michael Anderson. The heritage vineyard will act as a source of information about Petite Sirah and will also ensure that UC Davis students—the future leaders of the California wine industry—are exposed to and understand the role Petite Sirah plays in American viticulture.

Spreading the love

Last year, P.S. I Love You members decided it was time to get the message out directly to consumers, so they hosted their first consumer event, titled "Dark and Delicious," at Rosenblum Cellars in Alameda. Diaz says they were hoping to attract 10 wineries and 300 consumers but ended up with 20 wineries and almost 500 consumers. Due to last year's success, this year's tasting will take place at Concannon Vineyards in Livermore, where they'll be able to accommodate a larger crowd.

Dave Pramuk, former president and current board member of P.S. I Love You and one of the founding partners and current director of marketing and sales for Robert Biale Vineyards, has been a member of the group since the beginning and is thrilled with the increased interest in the organization, which has now grown to almost 70 members. "It's obvious that success breeds success, and I think it's nowhere but up from here."

Pramuk is quick to point out, though, that P.S. I Love You is still very much a grassroots organization with a big job ahead of it. "We're underdogs, we're fighting the giant machine—especially in Napa Valley—of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, and Petite Sirah is sort of the old-fashioned grape that we forgot about. I'm a fan of history, and I love the idea that we're keeping the tradition going."

Robert Biale Vineyards is playing its part by producing two Petite Sirahs. One, called Royal Punishers, is a blend of vineyards. The other is a single-vineyard bottling from Napa's Thomann Station vineyard. Pramuk came up with the name Royal Punishers, which is an anagram for "Peloursin" and "Syrah," and says it seemed very appropriate because, "Petite Sirah can be a formidable wine." Describing the 2005 release of Royal Punishers,

which is blended with a bit of Syrah to give it "a little elevation," he says it has a palate of dark fruit with earthy, mineral notes.

Aside from the two varietal bottlings, Pramuk says Robert Biale Vineyards sometimes uses a little Petite Sirah in its Zinfandel blends. "Petite Sirah is a great blending component, because it really adds a lot of structure and support in a wine," he says. "It gives color, depth and character, which balances Zinfandel's bright, spicy notes."

The winery makes 9,000 cases a year, and Petite Sirah makes up about 1,000 of those—but they'd like to make more. "Zinfandel and Petite Sirah are really what made California, and it's a fun, very active little category. [Petite Sirah] is getting growing acceptance as a serious red wine."

The issue for Robert Biale Vineyards is supply. "There aren't that many growers, and we're lucky to have the relationships we do. We're the only winery in Napa that I know of planting Petite Sirah. The quick math tells you that you should grow Cabernet, but our niche is Petite Sirah, so we're planting it in some prime sites to bolster our supply."

Supply isn't an issue at Foppiano Vineyards in Healdsburg, a winery with a longstanding relationship with Petite Sirah and a reputation as the leading proponent of the grape. "Petite Sirah has been on the ranch since before prohibition and in the 1960s, we started labeling it as its own varietal. We were one of the first wineries to do that. It's been very successful for us," says Louis Foppiano. "It's our mainstay. It's what we're known for, and it's the most planted varietal on the ranch," he adds.

Foppiano, who was one of the founders of P.S. I Love You, says the group's efforts have really paid off, citing the fact that he doesn't meet as many people today who don't know what Petite Sirah is. He feels the grape's name, specifically, has been a double-edged sword: "The best thing about Petite Sirah is that it has the same name as Syrah, and the worst thing about Petite Sirah is that it has the same name as Syrah."

Foppiano also points out that the use of it in blending has contributed to confusion about Petite Sirah and its taste profile, because many wines that aren't labeled as Petite Sirah actually taste a lot like Petite Sirah. Foppiano says that, for example, when he was growing up, Zinfandel was a lighter, fruitier wine, but that it's become much darker and full-bodied—in part, due to the addition of Petite Sirah.

"Today, most Zins are 10 to 15 percent Petite Sirah," he

explains. “Once there was a big difference between Zinfandel and Petite Sirah; now there’s a difference, but it’s not nearly as dramatic as it used to be.” As for the style of his signature wine, Foppiano says managing the body and tannins of the Petite Sirah is key. “One thing we try to do is make a Petite Sirah that’s drinkable when it’s released. That’s not saying it’s not big, but we don’t want it to be overpowering.”

All of the power, tannin, body and color in Petite Sirah is both a good and bad thing when the wine is bottled as a varietal. Petite Sirah can age; if made well, it can last 10, 20 years or more—it’s a wonderful choice for collectors building a cellar. But almost all wine sold in the United States is consumed within days or, at the most, weeks of when it’s purchased. Which is why blending is so important.

Bigger is sometimes better

Many wine drinkers love big reds—smoky, meaty Syrahs; spicy tooth-staining Zin; and deep, dark Petite Sirah. Foppiano says of Petite Sirah, “I’ve always called it the red wine drinker’s wine.”

Gilles de Chambure, a master sommelier and director of wine education at Meadowood in Napa, describes Petite Sirah as, “a full-bodied, rich wine. It’s spicy, it’s hearty, it really reflects the California sunshine.” De Chambure points out that, even though there are fewer vineyards planted to Petite Sirah, the ones that have survived are some of the best and oldest sites. He also believes the varietal has benefited from improvements in winemaking, so now the wines are “softer, richer and more balanced. They’ve lost their rusticity.”

De Chambure goes on to say that Petite Sirah is his choice when guests come to the Napa Valley looking to discover something new. He uses an introduction to Petite Sirah as a way to open a much bigger dialogue with his guests. “There are so many ways of talking about Petite Sirah that can really tell the whole story of the California wine industry and what makes it unique,” he says. De Chambure further explains that the story of Petite Sirah is a great vehicle to talk about how European varieties came to America, how they mutated and crossed, about the effect of phylloxera in Europe, what did and didn’t survive there and what survived in America.

Aside from educating his guests, de Chambure says the wine program at Meadowood acts as a forum for local grapegrowers and vintners. He often hosts mini-symposiums for the trade and plans for the next event to focus on Petite Sirah. He also feels there are many winemakers and grapegrowers who still don’t know

Petite Sirah very well, and that tastings and education are important, even in an established region like Napa. “You can’t stand still as a wine region,” he says, adding that it’s important to get everyone involved, from the professionals to consumers.

If your interest is piqued and you’d like to get involved, P.S. I Love You is hosting two upcoming events that will showcase Petite Sirah wines from throughout California:

- The Master’s of Petite Sirah walk-around tasting, dinner and silent auction, which will highlight older Petite Sirahs, will take place at Markham Vineyards in St. Helena on Friday, Nov. 9. Thirteen producers will pour Petite Sirahs that have aged for a minimum of 10 years. Featured wines include a 1969 vintage from Trentadue and a 1986 vintage from Foppiano.

- The second annual “Dark & Delicious” Petite Sirah tasting will take place at Concannon Vineyards in Livermore this coming February. Details will be announced as the date draws nearer.

Wine consumers love the process of discovery—of tasting and exploring new wines, new wineries and new wine regions. Petite Sirah may not be exactly new, but it has a big, bold palate that certainly fits the style that’s popular with many red wine drinkers these days and it’s relatively unknown. You know what they say: “Everything old is new again.” So Petite Sirah may just be the next hot thing—albeit one that’s been around for more than a century.