

As Seen On...

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PETITE SIRAH: PETITE OR NOT?

A recent conversation and tasting with Girard winemaker, Zach Long, brought to my attention that a long held belief that Petite Sirah is so named for its small berry size may be a myth. As we tasted Girard's 2007 Petite Sirah, a deliciously big, fruity, inky, juicy wine from Napa, I was quite surprised to hear Zach say that in fact Petite Sirah berries are not wee things compared to, say, Syrah, or other popular red grapes. I quickly checked my own book (beware: shameless plug ahead), *Wine At Your Fingertips*, to make sure that I had not been lying to my tens of readers all this time. Phew, I left out discussion of Petite Sirah berry size altogether!

That didn't mean, however, that I had not read in more than one place that "Its smaller berries with higher skin to pulp ratio leads to more intense flavors" in reference to Petite Sirah. I thought this was kind of the gist of it and, well, it does make sense. Petite Sirah is intensely flavored and has formidable tannin structure, which in part comes from the skins of the grapes. When I Googled "Petite Sirah berry size" the majority of results made reference to the small sized berries. However, when I

Googled actual images of the grapes on the vine (see picture) the berries did not appear to be that small after all. The clusters are snug but that is all that I could decipher from the pictures. Ambling down this road has only succeeded in confusing me (and now you!) so let's just get down to what we know...or what we think we know...

Petite Sirah was cultivated in the 1870s in the Rhone region of France where it is known as 'Durif' or 'Petite Syrah'. The grape is the result of a cross between Syrah and a relatively minor Rhone variety, Peloursin. It is more successful in California than it ever was in France and is most commonly spelled 'Petite Sirah' there, an anglicized spelling of the original name. The grape generally produces bold, deeply colored wines with big, dark, inky fruit and plenty of tannin structure. It is often used as a blending grape most notably to add color. Wineries in the U.S. can now use either Petite Sirah or Durif on wine labels. I love Petite Sirah in the winter because it is warming, soul-satisfying, and unique. You should give it a try no matter the berry size!

