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DIFFERENCE AMONG PETITE SIRAH, SYRAH, AND SHIRAZ

BY BRADEN SWEET

Much like Myanmar and Burma, bell peppers and capsicums, Clark Kent and Superman, two names for the same thing can lead to some head scratching. Similar to those cases, the name is the only thing that separates the identity of two of these grapes. Let me clear up the confusion right here: Syrah and Shiraz are just different names for the same grape (to further muddy the issue, other names for it include Sirah, Syrac and Schiras). Petite Sirah, on the other hand, remains its own entity.

For this article, I'll use the name Shiraz to refer to the Syrah/Sirah/Shiraz grape, staying true to my Aussie winemaking background. For general purposes though, the usage of one name over the other is typically dictated by location. The name Shiraz is used throughout Australia, although Californians and South Africans occasionally try it on too. Syrah is how the French, Washingtonians, and Argentinians refer to the grape, with some undecided Californians trailing along. Sirah and other spellings are adopted by those who haven't taken sides with the other two.

Shiraz, like Riesling, is a grape that can grow pretty much everywhere. There are large and successful plantings such disparate climates of France, South Africa, Argentina, Australia, California, Washington, and Oregon. In cooler climates, it can be peppery and elegant; in warmer climates, it powers through with high yields, deep color, and big fruity concentration. Due to the name, one legend around the grape is that it was brought to the Rhone region of France by Crusaders who had been to Shiraz in Persia, or Iran. DNA testing though indicates that it is actually a grape native to the Rhone Valley, developed from a cross of two lesser known varieties.

Contrary to popular conception about Petite Sirah, it is not simply a smaller version of Shiraz. It is actually an identical representation of another Rhone grape,

Durif, developed by a Dr. Durif in the 1880s, and transported to other locations around the turn of last century, thriving best in warm climates. Today, it has almost completely disappeared from its native country, France. Existing plantings of Petite Sirah are primarily located in California, Mexico, and Chile with some smaller plantings scattered across Australia, Israel, and Washington. Previously used primarily as a blending grape supporting Zinfandels, Cabernet Sauvignons and Shirazes, Petite Sirah is starting to get more recognition as a stand-alone varietal. Bottlings of it produce a wine that is dense, peppery, sometimes a little herbal with a very deep, almost purple color.

If you're looking for some great representations of the different styles of these wines, here are a few tips:

Refined yet powerful Old World Shirazes (Syrahs) are best found in the Northern Rhone of France, represented by the appellations Hermitage, St-Joseph, and Côte-Rôtie. Great recent years for these regions are 2006 and 2007.

Big, powerhouse Shirazes from Australia come from its warmer regions of Barossa Valley and Hunter Valley...

Personally, I find some of those blockbuster Australian Shirazes to be too high in alcohol lately, and have been choosing the more restrained Shirazes from the cooler climates of Australia, principally Victoria. My favorite Shiraz...is from the Grampians...A nice alternative is getting a Shiraz from the cooler climates of the US, like Washington and Northern Sonoma in California including Russian River and Alexander Valleys.

Petite Sirah is a little harder to track down at your local retailer and, when stocked, is often mixed in with the Shirazes. When purchasing, your best bet is a Californian wine of this grape. Try Trader Joe's for the Concannon Petite Sirah (around \$15).

