

## ***DON'T CALL IT DURIF***

BY CLARK SMITH

Just returned from a very interesting day at the 7th annual symposium of PS I Love You, featuring a wide variety of interesting speakers including a presentation on the Petite Sirah Heritage Block which is being created as part of the extensive UC Davis Vit and Eno Dept. makeover, which will include eight clones of Petite Sirah, four of its mother Peloursin, and hopefully a clone or two of its father, Syrah.

The PS's will be referred to as Durif, paying homage to the French nurseryman who apparently made the original crosses by fertilizing Peloursin flowers with Syrah pollen, planting the seeds and making selections from the resulting plants. Sounds scientifically kosher, but there are problems.

It seems that our brain-dead TTB has taken the position that Durif and Petite Sirah are distinct varieties. This means that unless ace Wine Institute legal beagle Wendell Lee can convince them what every wine professional knows -- i.e. that the two are synonymous -- our esteemed Federal Government will require that any wines made from vineyards propagated from cuttings taken from the Heritage Block will need to be labeled "Durif."

Oh, boy. Apart from the nerdy obscurity of the name, Durif is linked to the good doctor's failed experiment. His aim (which was successful, for all anybody cares) was to instill Peloursin's resistance to downy mildew into a syrah-like spawn. However, in the process he also transferred its hand grenade cluster tightness and thin skin as well, creating a variety which would do fine

in Peloursin's high altitude provenance but which was laughably susceptible to grey rot in the humid Rhone Valley floor. As a result, Durif has been a total flop in the Rhone, relegated to ignoble variety status in French eyes, demonstrably vastly inferior to its sire's status as top grape, and hardly planted at all.

But in California, the grape flourishes. In my explorations of the many North American AVAs for AppellationAmerica.com, I have encountered Rieslings, Merlots, Cabernet Francs, Viogniers and even Chardonnays that frankly put our North Coast offerings to shame. But because of its need for low humidity, Petite Sirah is very rarely planted outside the West Coast, a naturally exclusive California phenomenon more than any other grape.

There is no question in my mind that in California conditions, Petite Sirah excels over its prestigious parent. Check out my articles on Petite Sirah's regional characteristics and my speculations on its sources of diversity. Peloursin contributes a charming grapefruit-like brightness to the aroma which Syrah lacks. Time and again in competitions, flights of Petites receive as high as 50% gold medals while adjacent categories of Syrahs have to be content with 5 or 10%.

Winegrowers, more than most any other enterprise, are well advised to take the long view. As awareness of emerging AVA's grows in the coming decades, California will be well advised to concentrate on its natural strengths. The less association with the stigma of Dr. Durif's catastrophe, the better.

