

## **PETITE SIRAH PRIMER**

### Vina Robles' winemakers create impressive, food-friendly wines

BY KATHY MARCKS HARDESTY

I love wine in all of its varieties, colors, and textures, from most producers. But I do not love all varieties equally, particularly Petite Sirah. This masculine, tannic variety has such brawny, beefy characteristics, I describe

it as the stevedore of wines. And they're usually so deeply colored they stain your mouth and teeth. I've heard winemakers candidly describe it as wine that will take the enamel off your teeth. In years past I've liked some and disliked many. Yet my judgment changed as I tasted the Petite Sirahs from Vina Robles by winemaker Matthias Gubler.

When Gubler produced the Vina Robles 2004 Petite Sirah Endpost, a reserve level wine, I thought I've finally found a Petite Sirah I love and highly recommended it. So I was thrilled when he recently opened a bottle of the Endpost so I could see how it had aged. What was a big, showy wine upon release wasn't nearly as impressive at this stage. It wasn't bad, still big and fruity, but it was tightly wound and not giving. Of course, a few more years aging and it could still come around.

The Swiss-born winemaker then honestly informed me: "This was not my usual style in making Petite Sirah. We used 100 percent new oak (barrels), which we no longer do, and it was an experiment at the time. My style is more drinkable, the typical Vina Robles style."

Indeed, we tasted the 2003 Petite Sirah estate wine and it was much more impressive. It offered an array of tasty fruit flavors with loads of spice and juicy acidity

#### **WINE OF THE YEAR**

The winner of the "2009 Critics Challenge," an international wine competition held in San Diego, was Paso Robles winemaker David Frick for his Clayhouse 2006 Petite Sirah (\$24 retail). Awarded the highest honor as "wine of the year," Clayhouse has consistently earned gold medals in wine competitions across the country. "The 2006 has five to six percent Syrah just to soften it so it's more restrained and elegant," Frick explained. "Petite Sirah makes a big wine typically; you have to work with it to keep it under control." Frick says their mature vineyard is the key to their success.

The 40-year-old Petite Sirah vines were planted in 1968 with cuttings from Sonoma County's Alexander Valley wine region. Compared to the large crop yields in 2005, he noted 2006 was a cooler growing season with average rainfall, resulting in higher quality grapes. Frick has been part of the winemaking team since their first wines were made in 2001 by Napa Valley winemaker Tom Eddy. "Petite Sirah is coming into its own as a well respected variety, so I expect to see a lot more diversity and style," Frick said. "Ours has been more approachable earlier with better structure than those grown in warmer climates, like Lodi. We strive to make wines that over-deliver for the price."

#### **PETITE SIRAH'S HERITAGE**

In 1998, Dr. Carole Meredith, Professor Emerita, Dept. of Viticulture and Enology at U.C. Davis, and her colleagues confirmed the fact that the Petite Sirah grown in California is the same as the French variety Durif. Using DNA paternity analysis methods (the same used for humans) she determined they are simply two names for the same grape. "Syrah is the father of Petite Sirah," she stated in her documentation. "Petite Sirah (aka Durif) arose as a seedling around 1880 in the experimental vineyard of Dr. Francois Durif in southern France. The seed that became Durif was the result of a cross-pollination between an old French grape, Peloursin, and Syrah. Thus Petite Sirah shares half of its DNA with Syrah."

Interestingly she also noted that most of California's old vineyards typically contain other varieties of vines in the mix. At harvest the result is a field blend which means the wine is rarely 100 percent of the variety, be it Petite Sirah or Zinfandel. Meredith noted, "This kind of field blend exists in most old vineyards all over the world, whether it's a Petite Sirah vineyard in California or a Grenache vineyard in southern France."

The first California winery to plant Petite Sirah was Concannon Vineyards in Livermore in 1884. It was founded in 1883 by James Concannon, who was encouraged by the Catholic Archbishop Alemany to make sacramental wines. When

and it was still very well balanced. I preferred it to the reserve I'd raved so much about, and it was more food friendly. His 2007 Petite Sirah from Jardine Ranch was also impressive. Spicy and complex with red and black fruit flavors with the full-bodied, briary characters one expects from this variety, it's a quaffable wine that's also food friendly.

During our tasting at Vina Robles I was introduced to another young winemaker, Aaron Jackson, whose eponymous brand "Aaron" is devoted to Petite Sirah. His mantra made me laugh—"Go big or go home"—and it's the style of Petite Sirah he prefers. But his 2006 was impressive with its big blackberry and plum flavors highlighted with briary notes of spice, leather, and meat, quite well balanced and drinkable on its own. Jackson explained: "I use toasted barrels for more mid-palate structure. My wine has darker chocolate and coffee flavors, which are opposite of Matthias." Jackson, who began making his brand in 2002, says he likes extended barrel aging, as he says it's done in Napa. "I like to push barrel age closer to 50 percent new oak, and usually bottle in August," he said.

Both winemakers stress the importance of the right vineyards, while keeping crop yields down and harvesting in September to avoid overripe grapes. Vina Robles planted Petite Sirah in 1997 to enhance blends, but seeing its potential in 1999 they began producing it as a single varietal. "I get good consistency from year to year," Gubler concluded.

#### **PETITE SIRAH'S HERITAGE cont....**

Prohibition took effect, 1925-1933, under special dispensation from the church, Concannon was one of six wineries that could continue legally to make sacramental wines. York Mountain in Paso Robles, founded in 1882, was another, although I could find no documents stating that they made Petite Sirah, but it seems likely. York and Concannon have the unique record of being the oldest continuously operating wineries in California. Visit the advocacy group P.S. I Love You at [psiloveyou.org](http://psiloveyou.org) to check out their historical documents about Petite Sirah.

