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PITTSBURGH
BUSINESSTIMES

EASING WINTER'S CHILL WITH A BIG RED

BY JOHN ELD

Red wine lovers who partake right through the sweltering days of summer may disagree, but, for more, nothing calls for big, robust reds like the icy blasts of a frigid, northern winter.

There are many wines that can fill this bill — Chateaufeuf du Pape from southern France; Priorat from Spain; monster malbecs from Argentina; and spicy upstarts from Portugal. The one that may be overlooked is petite sirah from California.

Petite sirah is not shiraz, or the true syrah of the Rhone Valley — note the different spelling of “sirah.” But there is a connection. Through DNA testing, we now know petite sirah is a cross between the true, noble syrah and a lesser French grape called peloursin. So close are the flavor profiles of syrah and petite sirah that well-made examples of both can be difficult to tell apart. The principal descriptors are blackberry, currant, tar and white or black pepper. The texture of petite sirah is thick — almost coating the tongue — and, although a bit one-dimensional, they are wonderful wines for rich, strongly flavored food.

There has been a lot of confusion over the years about petite sirah. It is sometimes called by its synonym, durif, which hearkens to its French roots. Until the 1970s, it was used mostly as a blending grape to add punch and color to many California zinfandels and cabernets. It's still used this way, but the surge of interest in Rhone varietals has brought new attention and stardom, as more and more winemakers try their hand with it.

You only have to look at the nearly impenetrable purplish-black color of petite sirah to know this wine means business. The tannins can be gritty and harsh, although modern winemaking methods can easily remedy this. Aging it in-bottle for up to five years will make it smoother, but it doesn't really improve like cabernet sauvignon or sangiovese. It may lack complexity, but it's warm, likable and uncomplicated.

Unfortunately, the state Liquor Control Board doesn't make it easy to sample them. Most of the better ones are available only by special order, which means buying six or 12 bottles. Among listed wines, both Concannon and Bole make reliable entry-level examples. The Rosenblum Heritage Clone (\$18.99) is an excellent choice.

