

The Masked Monster Grape, Aka Wines For Fall: Petite Sirah

What better way to continue our discussion about wines perfect for fall than to start the month of October with some banter about a monster wine? Petite Sirah (note the "i" in Sirah) is also a stealthy little operator, or the masked creature standing on your front steps in just 30 days time. Boo-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!!

"What the heck is she getting at today," you ask with incredible anticipation and a smile dancing at the corners of your mouth?

Most people have never heard of this lesser known, somewhat cloak-and-dagger varietal. Petite Sirah is a test tube grape that actually got its start in the Rhone Valley of France. It is a cross between Syrah and Peloursin, and was originally named Durif, after it's human father. Dr. Durif developed the varietal in the 1800s to resist Powdery Mildew, to which Syrah is prone. Unfortunately being a tightly bunched varietal meant it wasn't equally resistant to gray rot. In the humid Southern Rhone this wasn't exactly a recipe for success.

Not to worry! California's drier climate provided just the breath of fresh air this varietal needed. Petite Sirah is a high-tannin, high-acid, darkly-purple grape varietal used to add structure (aka aging power), oomph (body) and/or color to other wines. So how/why the dramatic name change from Durif to Petite Sirah? It wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that folks in California started to get particularly concerned with labeling wines per the varietals involved. And because the grape's characteristics so resembled those of Sirah, it was called Petite Syrah. (The longer story of it's confused genetic background and resolution by Dr. Meredith can be found here, via the notes of Dennis Fife of Fife Vineyards.)

So why is it so poorly known? For whatever reason - and I'm truly uncertain as to why - Petite Sirah is just not grown in major quantities. Something like 3200 acres of vines in California are considered Petite Sirah today. And so it is a cult wine. Many wine shops don't even carry it as a single varietal offering. And I don't think I've ever seen it as such on a restaurant wine list, either. But somewhere along the way I was introduced to this great monster of a wine. I enjoy it even more in the fall because it packs such a great punch - particularly when the grill is going (yea meat paired with highly structured, deeply flavored wines) and the night's are cooler (and a little something extra to warm you up never hurts)!

I'll spare you my own wine notes this post because I want you to really seek out one of these big, blackberry-fruited, peppery, single-varietal Petite Sirahs this fall. If your shop doesn't carry a single

varietal offering, see if they can bring in...the Mettler Petite Sirah (~\$23). Once you taste these on their own you'll unmask this monster of a wine and better understand what this grape contributes when blended into wines like Trentadue's Old Patch Red...

Jo Diaz Says:
October 4th, 2008 at 5:20 pm

Welcome to the world of Petite Sirah.

A few updates for you and your readers.

<http://www.psiloveyou.org> is the quintessential Website for all things Petite Sirah, because it's an advocacy group for this stealth variety... As you've so rightly figured out.

There are currently 6,000 planted acres in California...

Dr. Carole Meredith's DNA study (in entirety) is on the PSILY site.

The PSILY group is now six years old, and if you peruse the site, you'll see that it's not as big a mystery anymore.

Let me tell you first, I'm originally from Maine, and only moved to Sonoma County in 1992... Back then, I didn't have a clue what Petite Sirah was, because I was too far away from California's history. I was more involved with being a direct descendent of Rev. William Blackstone - founder of Boston, and having a great grandfather (six generations removed) in Salem during the witch trials (I'm trusting he was too old to know what was going on, and didn't vote with the citizens)... All of this proving that the farther away from the historical source, the less you're going to grasp the real roots; thereby, explaining your statement, "So why is it so poorly known?"

In California, because it's a state with great viticultural history, we know it as a historical variety. If I were still living in Maine, I know I would never have heard of it, because it's too eclectic a cultivar. It's a cult cultivar... and we're darn (Yankee in me) proud of it. The fact that you're in Somerville, MA tells me that word is leaking out. I spent my summers in Stoneham in the 1950s and 1960s as a kid, so I know exactly where you are, and enjoy the fact that your wine knowledge is more advanced than mine was at your age.

Have fun with it, and - oh yes - PS I Love You!

