

PETITE SIRAH, NOTES AND SPECULATIONS

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“What is in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Just as Romeo and Juliet, the “star-cross’d” lovers, would learn, the awful truth is that a name, a proper name, is a difficult obstacle to overcome. In the wine world there is perhaps no better illustration of this truth than the erratic fortunes of Petite Sirah/Durif.

By now the story of the obscure French nurseryman/scientist Francois Durif and his namesake creation is well-known, as minimalist as it may be. The same few details are always repeated: Peloursin and Syrah, his ‘star-cross’d lovers’, were successfully, well, crossed in the late 19th century. But just as suddenly as the hybrid, Durif, came into existence it would be plunged into a long history of taxonomic instability, especially in California, that only DNA profiling in 1999 would undo.

Oz Clarke writes of Durif in his 2001 ed. of Encyclopedia of Grapes,

“The confusion in California seems to date from the 1920s, when officialdom lumped together Durif, Petite Sirah, Syrah and several other vines under the name of Petite Sirah.”

And just as often repeated is that the resulting wines made of the grape were disappointing.

“[I]t was originally grown in the south of France for its resistance to downy mildew – though not for its quality in any other respect.

It produces coarse, rustic red wine and has virtually disappeared from French vineyards.” ibid.

Jancis Robinson from her 1986 ed. of Wine Grapes and Wine (infamously) noted,

“The name Durif means almost nothing to most wine drinkers, but its California synonym Petite Sirah is known to millions. [...] There is nothing particularly petite about it, and it has no connection whatsoever with the noble Syrah of the Rhone valley [...]. [I]t was quite clear that it had none of the noblesse of the Pinot family and was always regarded as a rather ordinary variety, producing wine to match.”

She sums up the grape with a sniff.

“Rigorous though unsubtle.”

Of course, they note a few exceptions, hedge their bets. Mr. Clarke writes,

“In Australia Durif is grown under its own name, and produces dry, solid, four-square wines in warm climates that supposedly age forever – though they’re so impenetrable to start with, what they evolve into I’ve never been able to wait long enough to see.” ibid.

Ms. Robinson gives this,

“Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards is an exponent of the variety as good,



rigorous blending material for blowsier Zinfandels, but his is a keener appreciation than most. Perhaps it is simply, as so often the American case, a question of skillful marketing of the name.” ibid.

Fifteen years separate the two books! But it seems in the summer of 2009 Ms. Robinson found at long last a Petite Sirah she likes.

“As for Middleton’s Clayhouse Petite Sirah Paso Robles, I tasted it blind in San Diego, and take back all those nasty things I said (yet never wrote) about California Petite Sirah. Too many of them are rustic, massively tannic, tooth-enamel-stripping monsters, from which I derive no pleasure. Yet the Clayhouse PS is something special, not just to me, but to most of the other Critics Challenge judges (all journalists of some renown), who collectively chose it the best wine of the competition.”

There are two rather large curiosities about the appraisals of both Clarke and Robinson. Clarke says that the wines made from the grape are “coarse and rustic”, but also that Australian bottlings exist that “supposedly live forever”, wines he implies he shall never live long enough to drink. Robinson draws a similar contrast between ordinary, rustic and “the best wine of the competition”.

What can be made of this tension? I suggest at least four elements are at work.

1) There have never existed significant European expressions Petite Sirah/Durif bottlings from diverse terroirs to provide guidance to critics as to what the grape can do.

2) There has been no sustained inquiry into Petite Sirah/Durif clones; neither has it been established from which Syrah and Peloursin clones Durif was originally hybridized.

3) Petite Sirah/Durif may well prove to be especially sensitive to terroir.

4) The highest quality expressions of the grape have long aging potential.

Of the first element, it is hardly surprising that the arbiters of an elusive ‘noblesse’ in wine be from Great Britain. Much of French wine-making history, from Champagne to Bordeaux, has historically been linked with British taste and with long-standing cultural exchange. Indeed, it has often been observed that early skirmishes between the American Robert Parker and some British critics were likely motivated in part by irritation with Parker’s interference in this history.

The story is far more complex, of course, but my point is that absent French examples of Petite Sirah/Durif British critics have not known what to make of purely American expressions.

The truth of the second element, the absence of research into clones, is clearly stated in the 2003 ed. of Wine Grape Varieties in California, published by the U. of California, Ag. and Natural Resources,

“Little, if any, clonal research has been done on this variety. The only selection currently registered is listed as Petite Sirah FPS 03. The old Napa Valley selection is currently in the virus testing and virus therapy process.”

That Petite Sirah/Durif may be sensitive to terroir is borne out by numerous tastings of varietal bottlings, including a recent event at Concannon hosted by the advocacy group PS, I Love You and one held just last week by Tom Merle of the Bay Area Wine Society. There is simply no credible explanation for the wild variety of expressions apart from that of experimental terroirs (and quite likely, clonal distinctions).



Of the fourth element, this last one hints at a difficulty not easily resolved in California. That of the aging potential of Petite Sirah/Durif. If we might agree with Oz Clarke about long-lived Australian expressions, and if we agree, again citing *Wine Grape Varieties in California*, “Durif produces full-bodied, red table wine with deep color and long aging potential”, what is a state that produces millions and millions of gallons of easy-drinking wine to do?

What if it were to turn out through on-going plantings from Lodi to Mendocino, from Paso Robles to Dry Creek, from high in the Red Hills of Lake county to the Santa Clara Valley, that somewhere in California could be found the finest place to grow the grape? Will we abandon the best it has to offer, potentially a world standard; will we sacrifice aging potential for the short sell?

I would like to introduce a 5th element. Years ago, but within living memory, California used to enjoy what we now know to be historically correct field blends, but also simple mixes of vines in a vineyard, mixes of unknown clones, vines identified by shared taxonomic characteristics alone, or simply through the intimacies of grower and plant. That all changed with the advertisement-driven emergence of consumer preference for varietal labeling. Endless acres of mixed vines were grubbed up for a single grape variety.

It does not follow, however, that there was, as Oz Clarke states, pervasive ‘confusion’ over Petite Sirah/Durif’s proper identification all those years ago, any more than there was confusion about what were precisely the numerous Italian varieties in a given field-blend. I would suggest that there must have also existed a difference, equally important, in grower philosophy, a philosophy which was not interested in the varietal ‘purity’ of its vineyard.

But that is another story.

