

YOU SAY SHIRAZ, BUREAU SAYS PETITE

BY DAVID FALCHEK

You say "shiraz," others say "syrah."

But according to the federal government, from now on, U.S. wine producers must say "petite sirah," when talking about syrah's ever-more popular offspring.

The Taxation and Trade Bureau, which tightly controls wine labeling, handed down the order recently in a move welcomed by petite sirah devotees. The syrah/shiraz we know so well is an ancestor of petite sirah, but like parents and grandparents, very different from the generation in question.

Petite sirah's coming out occurs at a good time. February is the coldest month, and petite sirah is a comfort wine. When combined with a warm quilt, it chases the chill away.

Leaves a mark

You can always tell when people have been drinking petite sirah. Their teeth look like they did shots from an ink well. With blackened mouths and unsteady gait, they could break into the "Thriller" dance at any moment. Fortunately, these effects are temporary. Petite sirah has a cult allure - largely because it's different from cabernet, merlot or pinot noir and often packs a wallop.

The wine's secret is the petite sirah's petiteness. It's a small grape. For red wines, which suck color, flavor and tannins from grape skins as they ferment, smaller grapes mean bigger wines. The styles range from medium-bodied versions with moderate amounts of alcohol, to boozy, full-bodied tannic fruit bombs.

A petite sirah producers and aficionados group, called P.S. I Love You, positions petite sirah as an all-American heritage grape. But its origins are in France, where it is known as durif. While it was planted in California more than a century ago, truth is "petite sirah" was a catch-all name for several types of red grapes. Concannon Vineyards bottled the first wine called petite sirah 1961 and 30 years later the grape just about disappeared with barely 1,000 acres in the Golden State. This is a new era for a new variety which still has just 6,000 acres in California dedicated to it.

Short summary

You can get a rough idea of petite sirah from the inexpensive ones. Bogle 2008 California Petite Sirah is rather light-bodied, but shows the intense black fruit and pepper/spice flavor. \$13. *** 1/2

Concannon Vineyards Central Coast 2006 Petite Sirah is a similar, lighter-bodied wine with rich dark fruit turning cherry and cocoa at the end. \$11. ***

When producers catch an up-and-coming variety like petite sirah, some go inexpensive and accessible, others go for way, way, over-the-top wines. In the next decade, I expect a rise in petite sirahs that are focused, refined, and truly noble.



Grade: _____

Exceptional *****
Above average ****
Good ***
Below average **
Poor *