



GRAPE ESCAPE: Looking at the history of Petite Sirah wine

By Kim Kelly

When it comes to unique, mysterious and often misunderstood grape varieties, Petite Sirah (also spelled Petite Syrah) ranks among the top.

Often the first thing that comes to mind is it must be a tiny version of the Syrah grape. There is some complicated truth to that, by way of France and across the pond to California, but not entirely.

Without making this a three-part column, perhaps it's best to start with a brief "readers digest" version of the history of Petite Sirah.

According to "P. S. I Love You," a Petite Sirah Advocacy Organization dedicated entirely to this noble varietal, in 1880, Francois Durif, a French nurseryman, grew a new variety from seed material of an old French variety called Peloursin and named the new grape Durif, after himself.

Although Dr. Durif didn't know it at the time, the pollen source was Syrah, so the parentage of Peloursin and Syrah produced a grape known as Durif which in some parts of France was also called Petite Sirah.

This new varietal produced small berries with saturated color, dense fruit and many of the same characteristics of Syrah.

Just four years later, Durif was introduced into California and some growers there also adopted the name Petite Sirah from the French.

While Durif never really took off in the Rhone Valley of France, it became

more popular in California and quite often used in blending to add density and color. Those using it in this manner became known as "Rhone Rangers." Eventually a handful of producers started to make wine entirely from Petite Sirah and that's where the real pleasure begins.

While the berries might be small, wines made from Petite Sirah are anything but petite and demure.

Generally they are fairly massive. Due to the size of the berries they produce a high skin to juice ration, creating a lot of tannins, resulting in age worthy wines.

It is definitely full-bodied, with layers of dark, jammy blueberry and plum fruit, peppery spice and nice acidity.

As for food pairings, Petite Sirah positively supports the heartiest of dishes.

Try it with a roasted leg of lamb, beef stew, BBQ or roasted duck. And the bonus is Petite Sirah has just enough elegance to compliment a cheese plate or chocolate too.

So the next time you're in the mood for something a little different, perpetuate the passion and try a Petite Sirah.

One word of caution: It is one of the darkest, inky wines and absolutely a "tooth-stainer."

Forget the white strips, they don't have a chance, just enjoy your purple smile.

