

## **WINE TOPIC OF THE DAY – PETITE SIRAH**

Neither petite (in terms of body and color) nor syrah (often confused with Petite Syrah which is a small-berried syrah found in the Rhone), this grape was long thought to be a relative or variant of Durif, an almost extinct minor French varietal. According to Jancis Robinson, this has been disproved by modern DNA analysis, although this isn't held universally. See this site for additional information about the parentage:

<http://www.winelabels.org/artsirah.htm>

And also see the comment section for a comment by Jo Diaz, founder of P.S. I Love You, an advocacy group for Petite Sirah, where she definitively states that Durif, the original cross between Syrah and Peloursin done by Dr. Durif to try to eliminate powdery mildew in Syrah, is indeed Petite Sirah.

Petite Sirah has been an important blending grape for years, and recently has come to the forefront as a varietal worth bottling on its own, much as Cabernet Franc has become fashionable. For instance, Petite Sirah is useful for adding color and spine to weaker Cabernet Sauvignon vintages and it's been used to add body and color to washed out Pinot Noirs. In fact, Petite Sirah has been planted in California since the late 1800s. If you've drunk Ridge's Zinfandels, you have likely experienced Petite Sirah as part of the blend. They use Petite Sirah extensively to augment their excellent Zinfandel program. And, they bottle it independently as well.

However, it's a very nice grape on its own. At its best, it produces an inky, almost black color and offers a reasonable alternative to Cabernet Sauvignon, offering a slightly lighter body and tannic structure. For someone who finds Cabernet Sauvignon too big, Zinfandel too "earthy" and Pinot Noir too light, Petite Sirah can be a good offering. When I serve a Petite Sirah, I always mention that the color doesn't betray the body, that its darkness and opacity isn't a true indicator of its body. Sure, it's full-bodied, but it's generally more "drinkable" than a big, sandpapery Cabernet, at least for people who find them just too big. This means that you can pair it with large-flavored dishes, and, an additional advantage is that it's somewhat obscure to the average wine drinker and it offers a different flavor profile.

The problem? Most wine lists don't even have a Petite Sirah. And if they do, you're usually stuck with just one or two choices. If you are interested in this wine, you might lobby your wine buyer to add one or two to the menu. Of course, if you do that, you'll need to personally try to sell it because it's not going to sell itself.

What are the general characteristics of Petite Sirah?

As I've mentioned, it has an extremely dark, black color. You won't be seeing through it as you examine it in the glass. Some fairly frequent notes are similar to Cabernet Sauvignon – pepper, cedar, coffee, plum, blackberries, dark cherry, i.e. "dark fruits".

Some wine experts find it lacking in distinction, a little lacking in character. But that's what makes it good as a bridge for the uninitiated. What it lacks in "character" it makes up in "drinkability".

Bogle and Concannon are probably the best known of the California vintners. They offer low cost versions that are fairly reliable. Ridge, as I have mentioned, is a higher-end brand. Stag's Leap has another bottling that will set you back some coin (I believe that they spell it with a "y").

So what would you pair with Petite Sirah? Pretty much anything you'd pair with Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel or Syrah. Big, meaty, fatty meats. Rich stews. Roasted meats. Game. In my opinion, it would be a better match with tuna and salmon than any of the aforementioned varietals.

If you google the name, you'll find some interesting information that can not only help you navigate the "controversies" swirling around the grape, but you might also get a bit confused, but don't let that stop you from exploring this nice alternative to Cabernet Sauvignon and Meritage and, yes, Syrah.

*"DNA has been proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, by Dr. Carole Meredith of UC Davis. PS is the crossing of Syrah (father) with lesser known Peloursin (mother).*

*Francois Durif did the crossing in the early 1800's. For more info, check out [www.psiloveyou.org](http://www.psiloveyou.org), the advocacy group for PS, which I founded in 2002, and am still the exec. director.*

*Our site has the most current information on Petite Sirah... always."*

Comment by Jo Diaz - January 16, 2010 @ 5:09 pm

