

The Cure For The Common Cabernet Sauvignon

By Gil Kulers

It's April. Why is it snowing? As I write this, the white stuff is coming down pretty hard. I'm so over winter 2009, but it just won't breathe its last chilly breath. In the outside chance that this is the dawning of a new Ice Age, I decided to review the Official Wine of the New Ice Age—Petite Sirah.

On a cold, winter-like day in April, petite sirah (sometimes called durif or petite syrah) makes a great companion for hearty spring stews or when you're cuddling up in front of the fireplace to toast the vernal equinox.

Petite sirah is as enigmatic as the Easter Snow Bunny. Folks once thought petit sirah was related to the syrahs from France's Rhône Valley, but it is its own grape. Petite sirah is all but gone from France these days, but it sure loves California, where it thrived in abundance in the 1970s. However, when West Coast winemakers fell in love with cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, many petite sirah vines were tossed into the trash heap.

More recently, petite sirah has made somewhat of a resurgence with plantings more than quadrupling in the past decade. Still, petite sirah acreage is about half of what it was in 1976.

Besides the impending glaciers moving ever southward, which is reason enough, wine lovers are finding petite sirah as a more than adequate antidote for the common cabernet sauvignon. And that is a healthy trend.

I've got no particular beef with cabernet sauvignon, but often today's cabernets achieve their muscularity

through higher alcohol levels, which seem to know no ceiling. Petite sirah are far from alcohol-free, but much of this wine's intensity comes from the grape's thick skin and small berries. For example, in my sampling of 14 California petite sirahs, the average alcohol level was 14 percent, with more than half of the sample having 13.5 percent. (This includes the average-skewing Rosenblum Cellars' Rhodes Vineyard Petite Sirah coming in at a whopping 15.7 percent.)

And speaking of beef, I find petite sirah as a great companion for all sorts of roasted red meats, including spring lamb of course. Blessed with a closet full of spices, petite sirah's qualities seem to have more give and take with meaty flavors than with many run-of-the-mill cabernets or merlots.

On the retail front, petite sirah seems to be in a holding pattern since my previous exploration of the varietal in early 2007. Many of the same makers, such as Guenoc, Bogle and Stags' Leap, are still making solid, enjoyable interpretations of this wine. There are a few new faces, such as Arzein...in the mix that are also quite pleasing. Retailers say they don't sell a lot of the dark, black wine, which is usually stuck in the "other red" category or among the syrah/shiraz, but there are regulars who enjoy its big, bold, plummy flavors.

All things are viewed through the prism of our current economic downturn and wine is no exception. In this time of upheaval and chaos, petite sirah may find its big break. Cabernet sauvignon drinkers who may be scaling back their purchases may be a tad disappointed by the sameness of the \$15 and under



cabs. Now may be the time to pick up a bottle of something a little different. Not only will they surprised by the intensity of the petite sirah wines with their rich fruit qualities with flavors of smoky, dark chocolate, cinnamon and cloves, they will appreciate the cost.

In my petite sirah sampling, half of the wines were \$15 and under. And here's the kicker: as the prices went down, the scores went up. The \$9 Bogle and the \$10 Guenoc California, which were tasted blind, received some of the highest marks. There were some upscale winners, too. I found the Stags' Leap (\$38), the second most expensive bottle, and Artezin (\$25) to be elegant and tasty.

So if you need a big red wine that goes easy on your wallet for those upcoming frosty Memorial Day sleigh rides, pick up a bottle of petite sirah.

2005 Guenoc Petite Sirah, California



- \$10
- Two Thumbs Way Up
- Perfume-like aromas of violets, blackberry with a sultry smoky quality. It offered generous amounts of blackberry, ripe raspberry and sour cherry flavors with a pleasant note of nutmeg and cinnamon.

2005 Stags' Leap Petite Syrah, Napa Valley, California



- \$38
- Two Thumbs Way Up
- Elegant aromas of cassis, black cherry and slightly smoky oak. Flavors of tart cherry, blackberry and fresh plum give way to cinnamon, nutmeg and anise. It finishes with a touch of coffee and dark chocolate.

2006 Bogle Vineyards Petite Sirah, California



- \$9
- Two Thumbs Way Up
- Simple but enjoyable aromas and flavors of smoky, black currant, violets, black cherry and tart blackberry. Full-bodied yet it maintains a round, velvety quality that makes it easy to quaff. Seems to beg for food.

(Wines are rated on a scale ranging up from thumbs down, one thumb mostly up, one thumb up, two thumbs up, two thumbs way up and Golden Thumb Award. Prices are suggested retail prices as provided by the winery, one of its agents, a local distributor or retailer.)

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