

Petite in Name, Big in Satisfaction

American Petite Sirah, Not to Be Confused With Syrah, Is a Bold and Fruity Varietal That's Worth Seeking Out

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER

Early this year, we conducted a blind tasting of inexpensive Zinfandel and once again were disappointed with the current state of one of the loves of our youth. There was an interesting postscript, though. Of our six favorites, five of them were blended with some Petite Sirah to add color and tannic backbone. One of them was fully 15% Petite Sirah. It seems a shame that once-proud Zinfandel now needs Petite Sirah to give it life, but this much was clear: It was time to taste some Petite Sirah.

Fall is right around the corner, so it's time for a wine with some depth. Tastings columnists Dottie Gaiter and John Brecher tried a few bottles of Petite Sirah and share their picks.

Petite Sirah has been one of our favorite little joys for a long time. For years, it was the foundation of many American wines called "Burgundy," but now it has struck out on its own. Despite its identity problems -- it is different from Syrah, though some wineries call it Petite Syrah, and is the same as a grape called Durif, though some vines long considered Petite Sirah are actually something else -- its popularity does seem to be growing. The amount of acreage devoted to the grape in California has almost doubled since 2000, though it remains small compared with the big boys.

Did we say big? That's what this wine is all about. It's a dark, peppery wine with blackberries, blueberries, plums, some herbs and, at best, a hint of minerals. We've always liked it for its distinctiveness. It truly tastes like no other wine in the world. Or at least it has in the past. Our experience with some wines, unfortunately, has been that increased

popularity often equals decreased quality. How about Petite Sirah? We bought a large sampling from shelves to find out.

There are far more Petites out there than you might think. The problem is that most are made in fairly small quantities and few wine stores have enough to offer a Petite Sirah aisle, so they're often bunched together with Syrah or in the "Red-Other" area. We tasted the wines in blind flights over several nights.

Your chances of drinking a bottle from a winery that no longer exists are greater than you might expect. Read Wine Notes.

Good news: It's clear that winemakers continue to make Petite Sirah because they enjoy the wine, not just to make a buck. The result: wines of personality and some excitement, wines that we love to drink and to talk about. That doesn't mean we liked all of them. We think some were left a bit sweet, which is a mistake, and we found some too herbal and a few too creamy. But in just about every case, we felt that this was the wine that the vintner wanted to make. To us, one of the keys to truly loving wine is appreciating the vision behind a wine even if you don't much like the taste, and we appreciated the vast majority of these wines.

In a broad, blind tasting of American Petite Sirah, these were our favorites. Petite Sirah is a big, somewhat grapey wine and we'd pair it with hearty food -- lamb or a savory eggplant casserole are good ideas. We bought recent vintages because those are the ones you are most likely to see, but the best of these could certainly age well for a few years.



PS I Love You Members Reviewed Below:

Concannon Vineyard 'Limited Release' 2005 (Central Coast). \$13.99.

Very Good/Delicious

3 Best value. Clean and crisp, with great fruit tastes, like the whole berry is in there. A hint of chocolate, especially on the finish. Totally satisfying. Consistent favorite.

Stags' Leap Winery 2005 (Napa Valley). \$38.99.

Good/Very Good

Crisp and nicely tight, with plenty of fruit and an interesting finish with a little bit of bite that reminded us of black olives. A favorite for years.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious and Delicious!
These are the prices we paid at wine stores in California, Connecticut and New York. Prices vary widely.

What we discussed, time and again, was the crispness of the wines. We don't generally associate crispness with big, red wines, but the fine acidity and tannins of Petite Sirah give these wines a little crackle. The best ones are polished wines, and we mean that almost literally. They seem to have a sheen about them, like bright sun on a shiny wooden dresser. That makes their big, bold, somewhat grapey tastes complex, interesting and unexpected. It means that, in the good ones, the wine never gets boring. We sensed many different smells and tastes in these wines, from black cherries to chocolate, from herbal tea to smoked bacon (although, as it turned out, none of our favorites were heavy on the bacon).

Our best value was Concannon, which has been one of our go-to Petites for many years. Concannon says it first made Petite Sirah as a varietal wine in the 1961 vintage and, to us, it's amazing that it has remained as consistently good as it has, especially considering that it costs around \$14, is available nationally (the winery made 75,000 cases) and that the winery now is owned by the Wine Group, a giant company. We felt we were tasting ultra-ripe grapes that were bursting in our mouths, which gave us some serious joy. Adam Richardson, the winemaker, told us, "Petite Sirah is a big, full-bodied wine, which is what you want, but you want it to be soft and approachable as well. If you get both, you're doing well." When we told him that, when we tasted it, we wrote in our notes that it was like the whole berry was in there, he said: "We try to interfere with those grapes as little as possible. If it tastes like the whole grape is in there, that's because it is. We really respect the grapes."

By the way, one of our longtime favorites, Bogle, was not among our best this time, but it was still quite drinkable and certainly worth trying for about \$10. (We tried the 2006 in two separate flights.)

Petite Sirah is a great cold-weather wine and pairs well with hearty foods. Mr. Richardson of Concannon suggests game or duck breast, "something that's been grilled or roasted rather than stewed -- not a heavy version of the food. As far as vegetables, the richer, darker green vegetables like spinach. Spanakopita goes really well." We swooned at just the thought of that spinach-and-feta-cheese pie with these wines. Yum. And one more idea, for you risk-takers: Try it with a bite of chocolate.

