

There's Nothing Tiny About Petite Sirah

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Petite Sirah is one misunderstood wine.

First of all, there actually is nothing “petite” about it. From the grape to the glass, the juice stains your teeth and lips an inky hue, and leaves its mark in other ways on your palate: intense flavors and often-fierce tannins also are the trademarks of P.S., as it is sometimes lovingly called by adoring fans.

Until recently verified through DNA, even its origins were as murky and deep as the drink itself.

Despite a long history in Europe and the United States -- most specifically in California -- the heritage of Petite Sirah has been debated for more than a century. The short version is this: In 1880 in the south of France, a grape nurseryman named Dr. Francois Durif created a new variety of grape from an old French variety, Peloursin, and Syrah -- although at the time, Durif didn't know the pollen that he crossed with the Peloursin was Syrah. He named the new grape Durif, after himself. Throughout the years, the name “Petite Syrah” (spelled differently at that time) became common for Durif grapes, but also for other red varieties, including Peloursin and Syrah, the “parents” of Durif. (Is your head spinning yet?)

Things got even more confusing once Durif (the grape, not the guy) was introduced to California. The misnaming continued until some scientists in 1997, nearly 120 years after our nurseryman in southern France created his eponymous grape, confirmed through DNA testing that Petite Sirah and Durif were identical. In 1998, another group took it a step further, confirming once again through DNA that Petite Sirah (or Durif) is actually the result of Peloursin seeds fertilized with Syrah pollen. (Whew.)

Today, Petite Sirah could be considered the Rodney Dangerfield of wines -- it just doesn't get any respect. In an era when obscure grapes are being discovered and flaunted, most consumers know nothing of Petite Sirah. Some wine snobs snub the stuff.

Nonetheless, P.S. has its fans who know that it can create sublime wines with correct farming and smart wine-making. Many also know that Petite Sirahs can be cellared for decades and still taste terrific -- sometimes even better.

“Petite Sirah is thought of as an oddball variety -- when it's thought of at all -- but it's one of the more unique flavors of wine in California,” said Dan Fredman, a wine aficionado and representative for several family-owned wineries and importers from around the world.

“Petite Sirah has undergone quite a change in style since I first began drinking it back in the mid-1970s,” Fredman continued. “Back then, it was a rustic, reasonably-priced substitute for Cabernet. It took a long time to mellow out enough to drink, but when it did, it had a spiciness that stopped just shy of the level you'd expect from Zinfandel -- this was before gobby, high-alcohol Zins became fashionable.”

Fredman said Petite Sirahs have become bigger in flavor and higher in alcohol in the past decade, and the wine-makers began using more oak as a means to tame the tannins inherent in the variety.

“Nowadays, most are in that non-denominational, could-be-any-variety ‘bitchin’ red wine’ category, but others have maintained their rustic nature and reasonable alcohol levels, yet are quite enjoyable to drink with food,” he said.

Side-by-side tastings of several Petite Sirahs can illustrate the vast differences in this enigmatic wine.

In a recent tasting, Guenoc Valley Petite Sirah and Earthquake Petite Sirah from Michael-David Vineyards came out as the group’s favorites. The two couldn’t be more different: One is reserved in its power, the other a seismic blast in the mouth.

Guenoc is a sublimely restrained gentle giant -- a juicy, luscious wine that speaks of spice, ripe blackberry and ends with a slightly spicy, black pepper finish that lingers in the mouth.

Earthquake, at 15.5 percent alcohol by volume, is an aptly named monster. The coffee bean, blueberry and black cherry, cedar and vanilla flavors just add to the magnitude of this mammoth wine.

Give the much-maligned Petite Sirah a chance. With such diversity you’ll likely find one -- or several -- you enjoy.

<http://www.ketv.com/food/6024297/detail.html>

www.psiloveyou.org