

THE CHRONICLE WINE SELECTIONS

California Petite Sirah

Linda Murphy: Thursday, January 12, 2006

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There is nothing petite about Petite Sirah. This black grape, grown throughout the warmer regions of California, produces teeth-staining, brawny wines with dark berry and plum fruit, a grind of spice (usually black pepper) and sturdy tannins. Once considered a rustic wine, California Petite Sirah has become softer and more polished in recent years, as winemakers have learned to tame the tannins and astringency with various techniques in the vineyard and cellar.

Petite Sirah -- intentionally misspelled "Petite Syrah" by some producers -- is the same as Durif, a workhorse grape of southern France. Petite Sirah is also related to "regular" Syrah; Syrah is Petite's father, Peloursin the mother. Despite their common genes, Petite Sirah and Syrah are very different wines -- the "petite" son has more muscles and hair on his chest than Dad.

Here are our favorites from the 65 Petite Sirahs tasted for today:

[Edited to include PS I Love You members, as they appear in the story.]

~ TWO AND A HALF STARS ~

2003 Concannon Central Coast Limited Release Petite Sirah (\$15) Sweet vanilla and black-fruit aromas lead to a ripe, blueberry- and black cherry-filled wine. It's spicy and toasty, yet refreshing thanks to brisk acidity.

~ TWO STARS ~

2003 Foppiano Vineyards Estate Russian River Valley Petite Sirah (\$23) While toasty oak dominates the nose, the palate delivers rich, ripe wild blackberry and black plum flavors and an intense black-pepper spice. There is a slight mid-palate dryness, though a burst of juicy raspberry fruit and crisp acidity plumps up the finish.

~ THREE STARS ~

2004 Michael-David Earthquake Lodi Petite Sirah (\$28) This is the big one, with massive, jammy fruit (blackberry, black cherry and pie cherry), powerful tannins and a Richter-scale 15.7 alcohol content. Rarely are wines of this size balanced, yet Earthquake maintains its equilibrium and offers fine complexity in its toast, smoked meat, cola, vanilla and white-pepper notes.

~ THREE STARS ~

2003 Rosenblum Pickett Road Napa Valley Petite Sirah (\$28) Lush blackberry and blueberry fruit, black pepper and licorice notes, rustic earthiness and big, chewy tannins make this the powerhouse that Petite Sirah aficionados seek. Despite its size, the wine has wonderful balance and palate-cleansing acidity. The alcohol is a heady 15.6 percent, yet there isn't a lot of heat on the palate.

~ TWO AND A HALF STARS ~

2003 Rosenblum Rockpile Road Vineyard Rockpile Petite Sirah (\$36) Deep purple and intensely fruity -- almost Port-like -- this wine pushes the envelope with its very jammy blackberry and black plum fruit, yet has enough acidity, peppery spice and worn-leather complexity for balance. At 15.4 percent alcohol, it packs a punch.

~ TWO AND A HALF STARS ~

2002 Vina Robles Jardine Vineyard Paso Robles Petite Sirah (\$26) Stop reading if you don't like big, hedonistic wines, because this one is huge, loaded with wild, brambly blackberry fruit, black pepper, espresso, toast and vanilla flavors. The tannins are muscular and the palate is ripe, with a touch of residual sweetness.