

Sam Gugino's SAM COOKS Newsletter - January 2006

IN TODAY'S ISSUE:

- [PETITE SIRAH - Nothing petite about this wine](#)

PETITE SIRAH

Sometimes wine can be very confusing, like calling a French wine supérieur or a grand vin when it isn't necessarily superior to or grander than other wines. Petite Sirah has long been a confusing wine, though thankfully it's so delicious that the confusion is worth tolerating.

For starters, there's nothing petite about Petite Sirah. It's spicy, bold and full-bodied with inky black fruit, which is why the traveling caravan of California Petite Sirah producers is called the Blue Tooth Tour.

Then there are the mysterious origins of Petite Sirah. For many years it was assumed that Petite Sirah was a clone of Syrah, the noble variety from the Rhone Valley in France, which has also been called in its history Schiras, Sirac, Syrac, and Sirah, among other names. This presumed Petite Syrah (or Sirah) clone was prevalent around Hermitage and Cote Rotie, the legendary appellations of the Northern Rhone, and was thought to produce better wine than the Grosse Syrah, which was planted elsewhere.

But in the 1970s evidence mounted indicating that Petite Sirah wasn't Syrah at all but a totally different grape called Durif. More recent DNA studies by Dr. Carole Meredith of the University of California at Davis conclusively proved that Petite Sirah is Durif. Durif is named after Francois Durif, a French botanist who created it in the early 1880s by crossing Syrah and Peloursin, the latter "an obscure southern French vine" according to Jancis Robinson's Guide to Wine Grapes (Oxford).

Durif was first planted in America in the Napa Valley in the mid 1880s, a few years after Syrah was planted there. Both came to be called Petite Sirah and confusion reigned over the next 100 years.

For most of its life in California, Petite Sirah was a blending grape, adding deep color, tannic structure and jammy blackberry fruit to other varietals, most notably Zinfandel. In the 1940s, Larkmead and Louis M. Martini wineries made the first Petite Sirah varietal, but they called it Duriff, with an extra "f," adding to the confusion.

Those wines never caught on, though Petite Sirah continued to be used in blends. In the early 1960s, Petite Sirah reemerged as a single varietal, gradually gaining cult status because of its monumental tannic structure that allowed the wine to be cellared for years. Those tannins plus Petite Sirah's great, dark fruit, make it a good candidate for Port. "The first time we made it was astounding. It had many similarities to Portuguese Port," says Chris Smith, Director of Winemaking at Bogle Winery, the largest producer of Petite Sirah.

Part of Petite Sirah's cult appeal was its scarcity. A cult wine by definition has to be hard to get. Acreage of Petite Sirah in California plummeted from a peak of over 14,000 acres in 1977 to less than 2000 acres in 1995 as vines were pulled out in favor of the more popular Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay.

But things are looking up for Petite Sirah. Plantings increased to 5,166 acres in 2003 and the number of Petite Sirah producers has grown from 60 in 2002 to 186 at last count, though some of that number make miniscule amounts. Why the turnaround? One factor is that producers have made Petite Sirah more inviting to a wider range of consumers by taming those obstreperous tannins and emphasizing the wine's lush, juicy fruit. "My overall goal is not ageability," says Chris Madrigal of Napa's Madrigal Vineyards. "The wine will age very well but I'm trying for richness and concentration. I want a wine that's approachable in three years, not 20."

Despite its reputation for cellaring, Madrigal believes Petite Sirah will age gracefully for 12 to 15 years, not 20. However, Jim Concannon of Concannon Vineyard in Livermore thinks otherwise. "I popped open a 32-year-old bottle the other night. It was like a \$200 bottle of Rhone," Concannon says.

Ironically, another reason for the increased interest in Petite Sirah is the recent popularity of Syrah, particularly from California and Australia. (Australian Syrah is called Shiraz and at least one Aussie Petite Sirah producer calls its wine Durif.) "The name of Syrah has helped Petite," says Lou Foppiano, of Foppiano Vineyards in Sonoma, where Petite Sirah has been used in wines since 1937. But Foppiano is quick to add that "the quality of Petite has helped Syrah."

Petite Sirah producers are pretty adamant in their belief that Petite Sirah consistently makes a better wine than Syrah, at least in California. "Personally, I think Syrah wants to grow up to be Petite Sirah," Smith says. "At its best Syrah is like Petite Sirah is all the time."

"I think the next big red is going to be Petite Sirah, not Syrah, no matter what Wine Spectator says," Concannon says, referring to the magazine's December 15, 2003 cover story proclaiming Syrah as "The Next Big Red."

Despite their fans, Petite Sirah producers have often felt a lack of respect. One reason is the lackluster reputation of one of its parents, Peloursin. (What, you didn't know there was snobbery in the wine world?) The other, as Foppiano points out, is that Petite Sirah (or Durif) doesn't grow particularly well in the wet climate of its native France. But it thrives in the warm, dry climate of California.

Respect is coming, though. Madrigal says that in the last five years he has seen more and more Cabernet Sauvignon producers asking for Petite Sirah to blend into their wines. "It means that people are taking Petite Sirah seriously if they're willing to put it into Cabernet. And these are pretty high end people," he says.

Winter is a good time to enjoy Petite Sirah because it goes so well with hearty foods such as game and red meats. "I can't think of a better match with lamb," Madrigal says. "I'll take it over Cabernet 100 times out of 100."

Recent vintages of Petite Sirah have been solid, with 2001 and 2003 especially good. According to David Phillips of Michael-David Vineyards in Lodi, the 2004 vintage "is absolutely amazing. Perfect balance, intense fruit and flavors, well structured tannins." In addition to the names above, other top producers include: David Bruce, EOS, Guenoc, Hidden Cellars, Markham, Mettler, Parducci, Pedroncelli, Robert Biale, Ridge, Rosenblum, Trentadue, Topolos, Turley, and Stag's Leap Winery.

(This article first appeared in the January/February 2005 issue of Specialty Food Magazine.)