

PETITE SIRAH - ONE OF CALIFORNIA'S ORIGINAL VARIETIES

Filed under: [WINE](#), [Grape varieties](#) — Tom C March 2, 2007 @ 12:28 pm



If the topic of California red wine comes up, the lion's share of the conversation will almost surely revolve around Cabernet Sauvignon. There is no place in the entire world that is more closely associated with this variety, and in my opinion this includes Cabernet's homeland of Bordeaux where it is never bottled unblended.

California Cabernet can, and in many cases, does make world-class wine in in the Sunshine State, but Cabernet, though it has been in California since the 1880s, has

only become California's most favored son since the 1960s. Before Cabernet Sauvignon, there was our hero, Petite Sirah (or Petit Sirah, or Petite Syrah, etc.).

What is Petit Sirah? By now, Petit Sirah's convoluted origins have become the topic of many ampelographical arguments, and though there is far more agreement than disagreement on where this variety comes from, suffice it say that Petite Sirah's PRECISE family tree is still not fully settled. Here is what is clear...Petit Sirah is a crossed (and re-crossed) variety. Petit Sirah (often affectionately called "Pet" by growers and drinkers alike) seems to be the result of some series of crossings of:

- True SYRAH (a.k.a. Shiraz in Australia) which by most accounts is native to the northern Rhone

- PEL OUPSIN which is a very obscure southern French variety that is almost completely extinct in its native land

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- True SYRAH (a.k.a. Shiraz in Australia) which by most accounts is native to the northern Rhone
- PELOURSIN which is a very obscure southern French variety that is almost completely extinct in its native land.
- DURIF which itself had been frequently misidentified as Petit Sirah. What is interesting is that DNA profiling tests done on Durif have revealed that Durif is an offspring of Peloursin.
- A cross of just Peloursin and Durif that had in many cases been identified as “pure” Petit Sirah.

But even though now that Petit Sirah’s family tree is well documented, there are undoubtedly still quite a few vineyards that are populated with some (or even all) of Petit Sirah’s parents directly alongside with “full blooded” Petit Sirah. This may in part explain why Petit Sirah wines can vary quite widely in style.

Much of the Petit Sirah in California is found in Napa, Sonoma, Amador, and Mendocino counties (currently totaling about 3,500 acres), and even though there are no Italian cultivars in Petit Sirah’s genetic history, most of the plantations of Petit Sirah are found in the old vineyards that were originally planted by California’s earliest Italian immigrants, though in many of these same vineyards there are (or at least were) rows of Barbera and Sangiovese too. Aside from California’s quintessential grape variety Zinfandel, which are surely the oldest vines in the state, Petit Sirah plantings are likely next in line in terms of age, with a fair number of 100+ year old vines that are still producing fruit and wine. These old vine Petits yield the most balanced and complete wines, and they are true California viticultural treasure.

Before producers like Foppiano and Guenoc had done extensive research on PS’s clonal variations, soil and site preferences, etc. the results from which have allowed producers to tame PS’s wild, rough side, Petit Sirah was (and still is) a perfect blending partner for Zinfandel (the first varietal bottling of Petit Sirah was made by Concannon in the 1961 vintage, by the way), with Petit Sirah providing a stiff backbone and certain “pebbly” texture to the often thick, soft, and flamboyant Zin fruit. The “problem” with Petit Sirah is an abundance of both acids and tannins, both of which can be said to be “coarse” or at least “rustic” if not properly cropped (limited yields) and planted on the right sites (Pet’s cultivational “sweet spot” seems to be found on the steep and dry hillside sites in Sonoma and Mendocino counties), and even when Pet gets all that it wants, it’s still definitely not a wine for those who like New World Pinot Noir or even Aussie Shiraz. Petit Sirah is a decidedly “masculine” grape with a formidable, sometimes “scratchy” structure and mouthfeel, deep, black/purple color, and moderately to very high alcohol with a flavor/aroma profile of black fruits, cracked pepper, coffee, smoke, and sap.

Petit Sirah pairs exceptionally well with BIG foods - the bigger the better - especially marinated and grilled red meats, furred game, well-spiced stews, and hard, aged cheeses, especially those made from sheep’s milk.

Here is a complete list of all of the Petit Sirah wines currently in stock at Wine Library. As always, if you pick up a bottle or two, feel free to post your tasting notes here if you’re so inclined.

HOORAH!! - PETIT SIRAH!!!

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NO COMMENTS »

- Your writing of Petite Sirah is done quite well.

I have some updates for you, all of which can be found on the PS I Love You Website. PSILY is the advocacy group for Petite Sirah, which Louis Foppiano and I founded, after his First Annual Petite Sirah Noble Symposium. August 7, 2007, we'll be celebrating the Sixth Annual PS Noble Symposium... with the best and the brightest of PS growers and producers in California.

DNA UPDATES: The origin of PS is no longer convoluted. It's very much defined.

Petite Sirah (the only spelling now allowed on all new BTT approved labels) is the son of Syrah and Peloursin. Dr. Carole Meredith, while working at UC Davis, was responsible for the DNA finding; i.e., Petite Sirah is a cross (only one crossing) between Syrah (father) and the mother varietal (Peloursin). Dr. Francois Durif crossed the two varietals, while trying to find a plant resistant to powdery mildew. Since PS is very prone to bunch rot, it didn't receive favor in France, but has major historical significance in California. PS flourishes in our dry, Mediterranean climate. There are 7,000+ acres planted worldwide, with over 6,000+ thriving in California sunshine. In the 1960s, PS was planted in Napa Valley by 60 percent... At that time, Cab was NOT kind, and Petite Sirah was thriving as "Hearty Burgundy."

Today, there are over 360 California producers that make Petite Sirah, and the appellations where it's planted stretch the entire state... From the Sunny Santa Barbara area with Fess Parker's Epiphany Cellars, to Alger Vineyards, in Manton — very Northern California.

Comment by Jo Diaz — March 3, 2007 @ 12:10 pm

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