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M A G A Z I N E

Petite Sirah Beyond The Blend, April 2003

By Steve Heimoff

Not related in any way to Syrah—and hardly petite in the glass—this confounding grape is appearing more and more as a stand-alone varietal. Does it merit center stage? Our tasting panel weighs in.

California Petite Sirah: What comes to mind when you read these words? Anything specific at all, or just a muddle of mixed thoughts and tidbits of information?

Wine Enthusiast's editors grappled with Petite Sirah's identity last January, when we gathered at COPIA, the American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts, in the city of Napa, and tasted some 75 California "Pets" (as vintners call it) in the space of two days. What we found is that there are a number of very good—even excellent—wines out there, including bottlings from top-rated Switchback Ridge, Pride Mountain, Rockland and Carlisle. But not all Petite Sirahs fared as well.

Part of the problem is style, or lack of it. California's best wines—Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir—have classic European models that helped winemakers form a sort of Platonic ideal to work toward, or against. Not so with Petite Sirah, which has no real counterpart in Europe. Because the varietal never achieved a high style anywhere else, it is hard for winemakers to decide what it should taste like. This lack of focus and intention shows in the wines.

If there is an ideal California Petite Sirah, it is a heavy, dense wine, not a coarse one, but richly thick in flavor. The tannins are softer than the harsh, angular tannins of the past, and it possesses the elusive qualities of focus and brightness that vintners everywhere try to bring to their wines.

Pet's origins are shrouded in uncertainty. In his book, *Napa Wine*, the California historian Charles Sullivan writes that the first "true Syrah," the great grape of the northern Rhône, or some clone of it, was imported to Napa Valley in 1878, but was called "petite" Sirah because of its tiny berries and low yields. A few years later, another Napa grapegrower imported a French grape called Durif, but—to compound the confusion that would last for another century—he, too, referred to it as "Petite Sirah."

Durif is a hybrid grape, created by a French scientist, Dr. Francois Durif, in the late 1870s by crossing true Syrah with a minor varietal called Peloursin. Dr. Durif wanted to create a grape with Syrah's rich flavor and Peloursin's resistance to a common vine disease, powdery mildew. The new grape was disease-resistant, but failed to produce a high-quality wine. It virtually disappeared from France, but began to appear in Northern California in the late 19th century. No one is quite sure who brought it over.

When phylloxera struck California's vineyards in the 1890s, they were largely replanted with Durif vines, which in turn took the Petite Sirah moniker.

In the late 1990s, research into grape DNA conducted at the University of California, Davis by Dr. Carole Meredith, found that about 90 percent of California's Petite Sirah is, in fact, Durif, while the remaining 10 percent is Peloursin. Based on this research, in April, 2002, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms announced it would consider "Petite Sirah" and "Durif" to be synonymous.

Once it was established in California, Petite Sirah spread rapidly. According to the Foppiano winery, whose 1964 Petite Sirah was the first to use the variety's name on the label, there were approximately 7,500 acres planted to the grape in the 1930s. That number rose to 13,000 acres by the 1970s. This is close to the amount of Syrah or Sauvignon Blanc grown in California today. Where did it all go? Mostly, it went into jug wines sold as "Burgundy" or some such generic name. Petite Sirah grows thick-skinned grapes that gave a good, dark color, firm tannins, high alcohol and berry-rich fruitiness—just what consumers wanted. In fact, for more than a hundred years, Pet was grown in vineyards in which these varieties, and others, were interplanted, in what have come to be known as "field blends."

A few Pet pioneers tried their hardest to craft the variety into a world-class wine. Bernard Fetzter, who founded the eponymous winery in 1977, declared his hope that Fetzter's Petite Syrah (sic) "will stand up alongside any Côte-Rôtie or Rhône wines." That never happened. In the 1970s, Maynard Amerine, the famous U.C. Davis enology professor, predicted that Petite Sirah was a better grape for California than Pinot Noir—a prediction that crashed on the rocky shoals of reality.

By the early 1990s, Petite Sirah had hit a low point. There were only 1,651 acres remaining in the state. The grape and wine had fallen victim to conjoining forces. In the 1980s, varietal wines overtook generic wines in popularity, resulting in less demand for jug wines, including those spurious "Burgundies." And the red varietals people were demanding were Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and Pinot Noir, not Petite Sirah. Pet seemed like it would go the way of the dodo bird.

But something funny happened on the road to extinction. By 2001, there were 4,127 acres planted, a 150 percent increase in only eight years. Many of the new vines are in the premium coastal counties of Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino and San Luis Obispo. And of those 4,127 acres, some 1,300 were planted in the last four years. Why have so many people been planting a minor varietal once thought fit for little else than jug wines? Andy Beckstoffer, one of Napa's and Mendocino's major private grapegrowers, says it's due to the growers' desire to diversify, the same way financial planners advise folks to spread their investments around.

"People want to plant something, but they're scared of Syrah, Cabernet and Merlot, because there's so much planted," Beckstoffer says. "You can't grow Pinot Noir in most places. So if you want to plant a red grape, what else are you going to do?" Call it Pet-by-default.

The first Petite Sirah I took formal notes on was a 1979 from Stags' Leap Winery, the Napa Valley winery that put the variety on the upscale map. Even at the relatively old age of five years it remained almost black in color, and the aroma was still closed. I bring up that long-ago Pet only to emphasize how critics and connoisseurs used to think of Petite Sirah as a big, brooding bruiser in youth, filled with palate-numbing tannins that took forever to soften. Over the years, I have had many aged Pets, and around the time they reached their mid-teens, they turned sweet and mellow.

These days, fewer people want to age wine at all, much less for 15 years or more. The upshot is that winemakers are changing their approach to Petite Sirah, trying to craft wines that are softer and more appealing in youth, but still have enough complexity to garner high scores (and pull in high prices). Are they succeeding?

The Wine Enthusiast blind panel tasting can be summarized in a few sentences. The group was disappointed by the overall lack of quality and consistency among all wines, and dismayed by the so-so performance of the Napa Valley bottlings. The problem was not flavor: Nearly all the wines had decent berry-cherry ripeness, coaxed from the grapes by California's warm, sunny weather. Some phrases used by tasters point out the real problems. "Flawed winemaking," "careless," "too much sameness, not enough individuality," "superripe, overextracted."

"Nobody seems like they're putting much effort into the varietal," said one taster. "It's like an afterthought, a cash-flow wine." Still another remarked, "If I were served most of these wines, I wouldn't guess they were Petite Sirah."

I agree with all of these criticisms. There was nothing that could be taken away from the tasting that wrapped up, in the mind's eye, just what Petite Sirah is supposed to be. Some of the wines were tannic; others weren't. Some had deep, heavy flavors, while others were bright and jammy, and still others were earthy and herbal. Alcohol levels ranged from 13 percent to nearly 17 percent. Some had residual sugar, some were bone dry. Some were massively oaked, while others weren't. The differences among the wines went on and on.

An important factor influencing wine quality was winemaking talent. Winemaker mistakes often resulted in dirty, funky wines marred by bacterial spoilage. Then too, Pet's inherent weaknesses—a tendency to be hard and unyielding when young, a penchant for bitterness and astringency, and a certain boring flatness of texture—can come to the forefront unless great grapes and great winemaking coalesce. The best Pets have yet to rise to the quality level of California's best Cabernet Sauvignons and Syrahs.

Ultimately, though, Petite Sirah may be better off as a blending grape, especially in conjunction with other Rhône and Rhône-style grapes (including Zinfandel), than as a 100-percent varietal wine. Pet has enjoyed something of a buzz lately, with writers hyping it as an authentic California experience, a blast from the past and so on. But Petite Sirah is not among the world's great red wine grapes, and consumers seem implicitly to understand this.

"Petite Sirah is not fashionable, except when it's confused with real Syrah," the master sommelier at San Francisco's Rubicon Restaurant, Larry Stone, told me. If winemakers want to change consumers' attitudes, they're going to have to dig deep down into their bag of tricks and figure out how to make this ambiguous wine into a silk purse.