

No, sirah! Nothing petite about this grape variety

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In the world of wine there is probably no greater misnomer than petite sirah. This rather unusual grape variety is hardly petite with its chewy tannins and huge body. No wonder that it has been largely reserved as a blending grape - made alone it is too massive for most palates, but blended it can give spine to weak wines.

The origin of petite sirah has been analyzed for decades. DNA research has traced much of it to durif, a Rhone grape that no longer exists in France. However, other varieties - pelousin, beclan, carignane, mourvedre, grenache, mondeuse and alicante - have been found in the variety too. The extensive mix is probably a result of field blending - varieties being crossed after growing alongside each other in a field.

Although its presence was initially developed in the Rhone



WINE, ETC.

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Valley of France, petite sirah is developing a cult following in California, thanks to 60 stubbornly committed producers. Ever since we sampled a bottle of Concannon petite sirah - the California don of this variety - we've developed a liking for the grape. Only the adventurous need apply, because unblended petite sirah is brawny, teeth-coating wine that can shock the palate. It is not for sipping.

Aged for a decade or more, petite sirah can develop into a rich and intensive red wine, as evidenced by a 1987 Foppiano we recently enjoyed. Once decanted - and that's a must for these massive wines - the wine often shows off brambly black cherries, raspberries and cracked black pepper. We served it alongside a beef stew and it was a true delight.