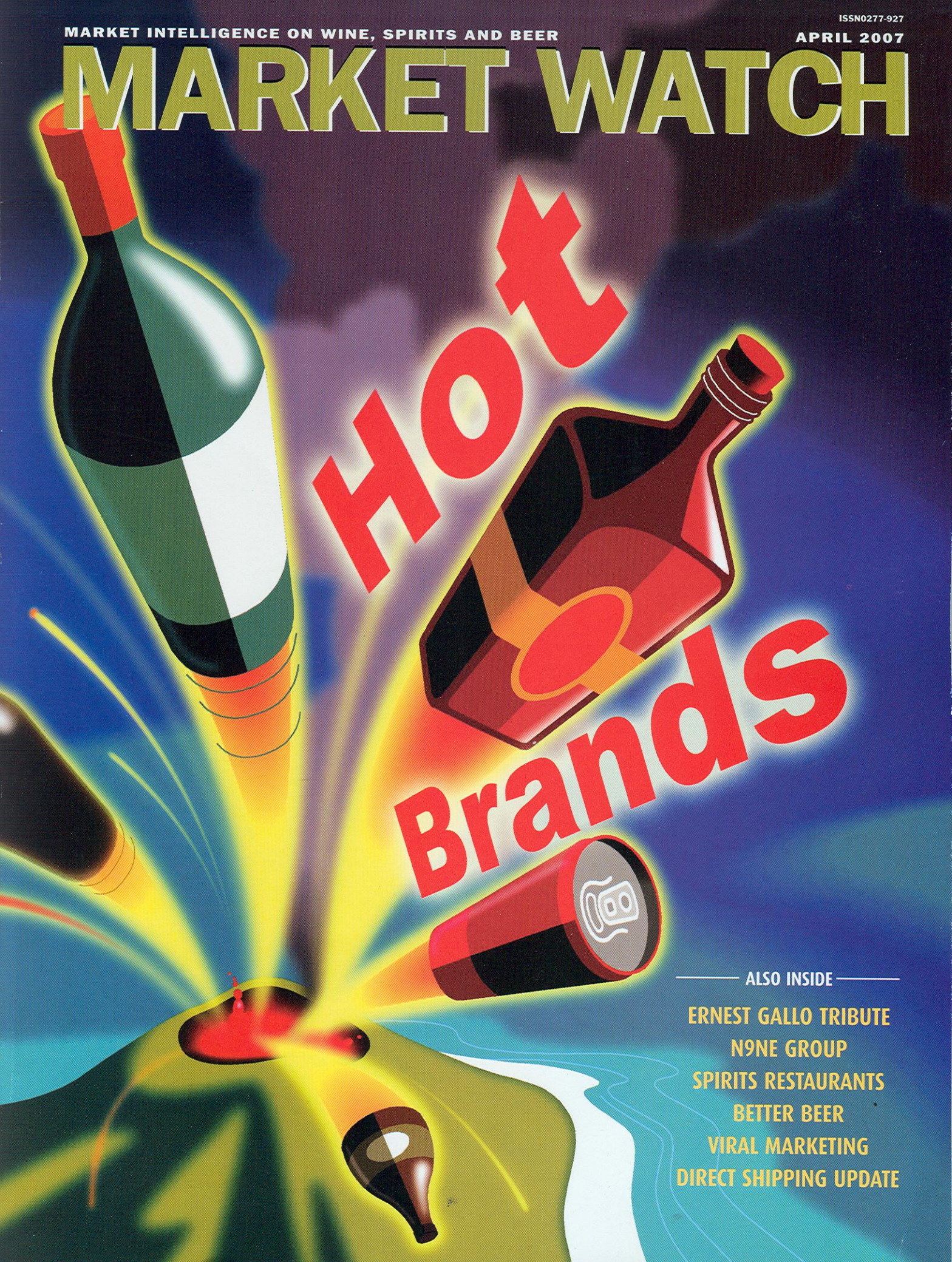


MARKET INTELLIGENCE ON WINE, SPIRITS AND BEER

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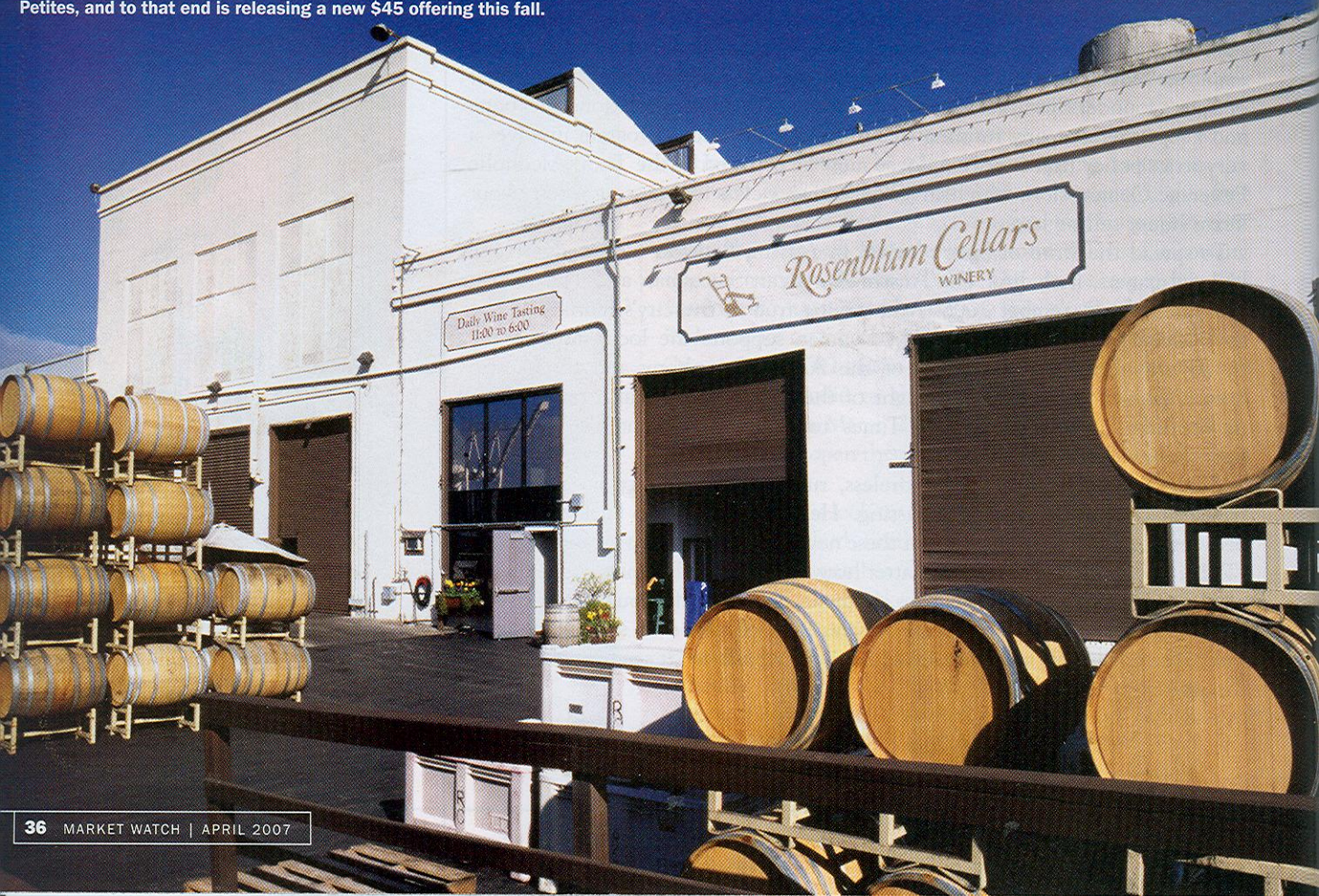
DIRECT SHIPPING UPDATE

PETITE NO MORE

Petite Sirah, a varietal once reserved for blending, breaks out on its own in California

BY H. LEE MURPHY

Rosenblum Cellars in Alameda, California, produced 15,000 cases of the up-and-coming Petite Sirah varietal last year. Owner Kent Rosenblum believes the market is ready to embrace higher-end Petites, and to that end is releasing a new \$45 offering this fall.



On a Thursday evening in early February, winery owners and special guests were invited to Rosenblum Cellars in Alameda, California, for a tasting of Petite Sirah wines culled from producers around the state. The setting of this unprecedented event was, perhaps, prophetic: In the same rooms at Rosenblum Cellars, a similar event was staged some 15 years ago to taste a then up-and-coming varietal about to emerge on the national stage: Zinfandel. The tasting was so successful that the Zinfandel Advocates & Producers (ZAP) took the Rosenblum initiative and ran with it, creating a blitzkrieg of marketing that has propelled Zin to superstar status.

Is Petite Sirah poised for that same kind of success? By all indications, it's on the verge of broader market acceptance. More than 50 Petite Sirah winemakers have joined together to form a ZAP-like group named P.S. I Love You. They're mounting a full-court public relations effort that has included a joint venture campaign with the National Pork Board touting Petite Sirah as "the other red wine with the other white meat." There has also been a rising number of Petite Sirah exhibitions and discussion panels at numerous high-profile wine events around the country.

All this recent attention is quite a turnabout for a grape variety that most Americans either don't recognize or are apt to confuse with its cousin, Syrah. In fact, Petite descends from the French grape Durif that was created in the 1880s in the Rhône as a mildew-resistant hybrid of the varieties Syrah and Peloursin. California growers seeking phylloxera-resistant vines in the late 19th century imported both Syrah and, inadvertently, Durif. The powerhouse fruit bomb flourished in California wine country, as it could be depended on to darken and enrich the otherwise thin jug wines churned out through most of the last century.

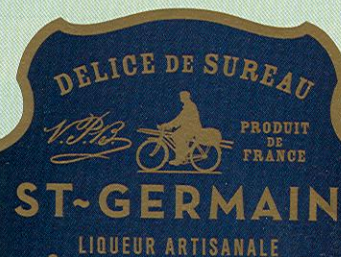
A ROUGH BEGINNING

As jug wines declined, so did blending grapes like Petite Sirah. From its peak of 14,215 acres planted in California in 1976, Petite vines were ripped out to make way for the more popular Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon, as well as other varieties, and Petite fell to a low of just 1,738 acres in 1995. But since then, as wineries have belatedly discovered that Petite sells on its own, replantings have been rising fast—with 6,100 acres under vine in 2005.

Kent Rosenblum, the owner of Rosenblum Cellars, has been bottling 100-percent Petite Sirah since 1978. Rosenblum, who can talk at great length about the rich phenolics and antioxidants of the varietal, suspects that many rival winemakers are bolstering their Zins, Merlots and other red wines with Petite. "The Petite grape, when blended, can make any wine thicker and weightier," Rosenblum says. "On its own it's got great color, spice and mouth feel."

Last year Rosenblum produced 15,000 cases of Petite Sirah (the winery's Zin bottlings exceeded 125,000 cases) ranging from the 2004 San Francisco Bay Heritage Clones Petite Sirah (\$18 a 750-ml. bottle) to the 2004 Sonoma County Rock Pile Road (\$38). This coming September, Rosenblum will introduce its 2005 Rincon Valley Kick Reserve Petite Sirah. The premier vintage is set at the highest retail price ever for a Rosenblum Petite—\$45. "There's more room at the high end for really good Petite Sirah," the owner contends.

At Foppiano Vineyards near Healdsburg, California, co-owner Louis Foppiano produced 10,000 cases of Petite Sirah last year, up from 4,000 cases five years earlier. "Petite Sirah is our fastest growing varietal here," he says. But the grape wasn't always on people's radar. When he started back in the 1970s, Foppiano recalls, "Almost nobody knew what Petite was. It was a pretty tough sell. We went after the wine-by-the-glass market at restaurants, and the serving staffs liked it a lot and pushed it."



INDUSTRY QUOTES:

GARY REGAN

(Author, *Joy Of Mixology*,
Co-host Ardentspirits.com)

"I loved working with St-Germain. It's the perfect sort of liqueur to experiment with when working with gins, tequilas, and piscos. Subtle, but holds a definite presence. I haven't gotten around to using it with rums, whiskies, etc., as yet, but that will be my next stop on the mixology trail with St-Germain. I really do love this stuff."

CHAD SOLOMON

(Mixologist, Pegu Club)

"I'm blown away by this stuff - very high quality. The complexity of flavor is amazing, yet so clean across the board. I can't wait until St-Germain hits the market. I always throw on an Elderflower Fizz. The drink is so popular. For now I've been using elderflower syrup - totally unstable and amateur night compared to St-Germain."

St-Germain. Product of France. Imported by
Maison 6ème Arr., Philadelphia, PA
20% Alc/vol (40 Proof) - St-Germain is
a registered trademark of Osez Vous?
International Spirits, LLC.

SPECIAL HANDLING

Petite Sirah is tricky. It's naturally more tannic than Cabernet Sauvignon, and wine-makers have to carefully manipulate the grapes—gently punching down the skins during fermentation—to avoid a harsh and astringent product. Foppiano recalls ordering one Petite with an unfamiliar label at a restaurant in Texas in the 1970s that was so rough and heavy he was forced to cut it with water to make it palatable. "I felt like an old Italian. That's what they did with rough and heavy wines in the 1930s," Foppiano says. "Thank goodness most of us have learned how to tame the Petite grape since then." Foppiano's 2004 Russian River Petite sells at \$23 a 750-ml. bottle, with a reserve version priced at \$48.

Robert Biale Vineyards in Napa produces 8,000 cases of Petite a year, split between the 2004 Thomann Station (\$40 a 750-ml. bottle) and the 2004 Royal Punishers (\$36, with 5-percent Syrah grapes added to the blend). David Pramuk, a Biale partner, believes, "Petite Sirah was always a solid grape that at some point just got outmarketed by Cabernet Sauvignon. It ended up in a limited niche."

One marketing challenge is Petite's slow aging process. After Biale bottles its Petite, the wine rests for a full year before it's released on the market. "After that, we recommend five to 10 years of cellaring before it's ready for prime drinking," Pramuk says.

At Bogle Vineyard & Winery in Clarksburg, California, the No. 1 Petite Sirah producer can't plant new vines fast enough to keep up with demand. In 2005 the winery bottled 136,000 cases of Petite, up from 50,000 in 1999 and a mere 4,500 cases in 1993, according to owner Patty Bogle. She's kept prices low, with the Bogle Petite Sirah now offered at \$10 a 750-ml. bottle. "The low price is important," Bogle says. "I don't think most people are willing to spend \$30 to taste a new varietal they're not sure about."

Concannon Vineyard in California's Livermore Valley also adheres to the low-price principle. The company is the second largest Petite producer, with a volume of 50,000 cases last year. Its 2004 Petite Sirah is priced at \$12 a 750-ml. bottle, while a 1,000-case 2004 Reserve version goes for \$20, and the more elite 2004 Heritage Petite Sirah, of which just 300 cases were made from 50-year-old vines, sells for \$35.

PETITE HISTORY

At the age of 75, Jim Concannon is a walking Petite Sirah encyclopedia. His family founded Concannon Vineyard in 1883 and sold the first varietally named Petite Sirah back in 1964; at that time, the 1961 vintage retailed for \$3.25 a 750-ml. bottle. "Retailers thought we were crazy," Concannon



With a volume of 50,000 cases last year, Concannon Vineyards in California's Livermore Valley is the United States' second largest producer of Petite Sirah. The winery also holds the distinction of producing the first varietally sold Petite, doing so in 1964.

recalls. "Generics like Chablis and Burgundy were what sold back then. We numbered each Petite bottle individually, and in time it caught on and began selling. We sold all we could make and stayed with it."

Still, Petite Sirah may not be for all tastes. The wine's blueberry and blackberry flavors are so powerful that some tasters complain Petite is too fruity. "You have to drink Petite Sirah with hearty foods," says Paul Dolan, a partner in Parducci Wine Cellars in Mendocino County. "Heavy meat dishes balance out the wine." Even so, Parducci lightens its Petite by adding small amounts of Viognier (2 to 4 percent), as is the case with the 2004 Parducci True Grit Petite Sirah (\$24 a 750-ml. bottle).

Robert Brittan, owner of Brittan Vineyards in St. Helena, is looking forward to the release of his first Petite Sirah vintage, which is set to debut in less than two years. But he's also worried about a glut of Petite cascading onto the market in the future. "Are we getting ahead of demand? Yes, that's probably going to happen. It's happened with almost every other varietal," he says. Some excess will be siphoned away for blending. "It's amazing how many cheap Cabs have been bolstered with small amounts of Petite Sirah," Brittan adds. But he also observes that Petite has been garnering better reviews of late from the wine media, fueling additional sales. "The American tasting palate is evolving toward bigger and more intense wines," Brittan notes. "That's exactly what Petite Sirah offers. Our timing is very good."

mw

H. Lee Murphy is a contributing editor of MARKET WATCH.