

Petite sirah not so tiny wine

It's rich, full-bodied and has tooth-staining color from the grape skins

CATHERINE RABB ON WINE ~ Posted on Tue, Aug. 01, 2006

Petite sirah is a grape with marketing issues.

This is changing, as die-hard, blue-toothed lovers of powerful red varietals are embracing, even obsessing about, this wine.

But if there was ever a grape that needed a Montel segment, it is petite sirah.

In the early 1980s, I remember being taught (incorrectly, it turns out) that it wasn't syrah at all. But genetic testing has finally answered the question, "Who's your daddy?"

We now know the grape is a cross between the regal syrah of the Rhone region of France and a much humbler grape, peloursin. This cross is called Durif, and petite sirah is just another name for Durif. (Grapes are like Charlotte streets -- they can have different names in different places.)

Despite its French parents, petite sirah is more at home on American soil, thriving in California. It loves hot climates, and can reach a high sugar level that ferments into high-alcohol wines.

Petite sirah was originally considered to be a powerful, tannic workhorse grape, used to add color and structure to jug wines and to punch up weaker cabs and zins. The spelling can be confusing, too. You'll see petite or petit and syrah or sirah on labels.

Don't let the name fool you. There's nothing petite about this wine. It's like nicknaming a 300-pound linebacker "Tiny." Petite sirah is rich, full-bodied, and full of tooth-staining color from the grape skins.

Petit sirahs can be among California's longest-lived wines, due to the high tannin and acid levels. They may require a little patience and extra bottle time to soften and mature.

Noted for dark inky color, rich black fruit and spice flavors, and intense tastes, they are often paired with strong meats like lamb or beef and hold up well to spicy sauces. Some folks love this wine with dark chocolate.

A few wineries, such as **Concannon** and **Foppiano**, consider petite sirah their flagship variety. However, many winemakers better known for other varietals make a limited amount.

Often snapped up by aficionados, petite sirah has an almost cult-like following. There is even a petit sirah organization called **P.S. I Love You. Check it out at www.psiloveyou.org.**

When you taste one of these wines, watch out. The alcohol levels are often quite high, and even a glass can make your elbows weak. Sometimes these wines feel more like a fortified wine than a table wine.

I'm also not kidding about the blue teeth. At a recent wine dinner, after smiling and chatting with my table companions for an hour or so, I was embarrassed to see my stained teeth when I went to the restroom. Try one of these delicious wines at home, or bring a designated driver and pack a toothbrush.

PS I Love You member wine mentioned in this article:

At Under the Grape in Ballantyne Village, Barb Tyree recommends David Bruce Central Coast Petite Sirah 2004 (\$18.99). She calls it full and dense, with intense black fruit aromas.

www.psiloveyou.org