

PETITE SIRAH'S BIG TASTE BELIES ITS LITTLE NAME

BY TAYLOR EASON

Petite sirah, the re-emerged bastard French wine child from royal pedigree, is called Durif in many parts of the world. It was engineered in the late 1800s by a French guy named -- you guessed it -- Durif. He cross-pollinated the venerated syrah grape with an obscure French peasant grape called Peloursin and created a highly marketable, mildew-resistant variety.

The French winemakers admired its pest-resistance properties, but finicky French wine drinkers rejected the flavor and it almost died out. Many years later, petite sirah, which quite likely migrated to the United States via Ellis Island, found its name when American growers used it in their "field blends," along with several other grapes that were unknown but popular now, such as Carignan and Grenache.

With its dark, inky color and often-astringent tannins, petite sirah gave a wimpy blend some oomph. It wasn't until recently that winemakers began bottling petite sirah as a single varietal wine, and the American public, typically contrary to French opinions, began its discreet love affair with this rejected soul.

But the rise to success hasn't been easy for this ill-named grape. The spelling has created a difficult marketing hurdle, since most people want to name it after its mother grape; I've seen it listed as "petite syrah" many times. And Australia, where a tiny bit is grown, calls it Durif, eschewing the American nomenclature. But to be fair, most growers weren't completely sure they were growing petite sirah until 2003, when genetic testing revealed its true lineage.

These days, no one seriously cares about petite sirah's birthright. People who love big, bold, in-your-face yet fruity wines will clamor for this stuff. There's nothing shy or small about the wine, whose purple juice leaves telltale stains on your tongue.

Having only one glass proves challenging. At its best, this varietal gushes ripe blackberry and dark cherry fruit, with some lovely rustic leatheriness on the palate. At its worst -- often when the grape grower has harvested too early -- it smacks of bright red fruit, green pepper and olives. But both of these spectrums have their loyal audiences, and this badass bastard grape deserves your allegiance.

To find out more about petite sirah, check out the fan club website: www.psiloveyou.org.

RECOMMENDED WINES

- Girard 2004 Petite Sirah Napa Valley.** *Gushingly rich and ripe blackberries, licorice and strong brewed espresso. Brawny tannins that smooth out with some air and would cellar nicely. 4.5 stars*
- Mettler 2003 Petite Sirah Lodi.** *Fragrant blackberry jam loaded with sweet black cherries. Excellent balance of tannins and acids, making this PS experience quite pleasurable. 4 stars*