

The Mainstreaming of Petite Sirah Finding Beauty Within the Beast

By David P. Jones

David P. Jones is a native San Franciscan with degrees in geography and environmental studies from UC Berkeley. He taught at several Bay Area colleges, then owned a local sightseeing company. He now indulges his passion for wine as a writer, lecturer, consultant, and event planner.



“Wine Wisdom” first visited Petite Sirah nearly three years ago, shortly after its parentage (Syrah and Peloursin) was established through DNA fingerprinting by Dr. Carole Meredith at UC Davis. Thus ennobled with Rhone heritage, the grape and its wine began attracting more professional attention and consumer converts. This past year Petite Sirah was awarded inclusion in the Rhone Rangers’ quiver of quaffers and an advocacy organization, “PS—I Love You,” was launched with a daylong symposium that I had the privilege to emcee.

Petite Sirah has historically been used primarily as a blending grape here in California. Over the past three decades a few vintners, appreciative of the deep color and firm structure that Petite Sirah can lend in blend, have bottled this expressive ferment on its own. Early issues certainly championed its muscularity, often overpowering and alienating the unaccustomed palate. Indeed, the 1996s and ‘97s we reviewed last time around were predominantly uncompromising behemoths.

Things have changed. Our Wine Works panel of wine writers and educators recently reviewed the available crop of ‘99 and ‘00 Petite Sirahs. What we found were far more approachable wines. This trend suggests a growing vintner appreciation of the varietal’s potential when handled delicately, like a Pinot Noir, rather than the more aggressively extractive approach typical in vinting Cabernet Sauvignon.

Many fanatics of the varietal remain attracted to its most muscular expression. But enormity need not preclude finesse. Simple taming of the tannins balances the wine, allowing the inherently rich fruit flavors and complexities to surface, even in its youth. Softened or traditional, Petite Sirah will always be a wine of intensity and weight. It is capable of standing up to the heartiest of foods and very few wines exhibit its cellaring (aging) potential.

Witnessing a more genteel disposition among the current-release Petite Sirahs were Dan Berger, Bruce Cass, Skip Hansen, Steve Heimoff, Steve Pitcher, Edgar Vogt and myself. Employing the Robert Parker/Wine Spectator “100” scale, we found nine wines (compared to only one last time around) garnering scores of 90 or above:

93 2000 Trentadue, Dry Creek Valley (\$30) – Wow! Inky and intense. Aromatics of opulent black fruit, roasted coffee beans and freshly ground black pepper, replicating precisely on the palate. Seamless symmetry. Clean and refined. Astoundingly elegant for its massive architecture. Poster boy for New Wave Petite Sirah. Enjoyable now thru eternity.

92 2000 Frey (Organic), Mendocino County (\$12) – Traditional style. Dark and brooding with unusually mature bouquet. Laden with black cherry, hot spices, cocoa, sage and leather abutting a wall of tannins. Be humbled now, or wait five to seven years for softening.

91 2000 Lava Cap, El Dorado County (\$30) – Ethereal aromas of ripe black fruit and violets belie a heated (higher alcohol) and rustic delivery with earthy and peppery pronouncements. Rugby in tutus. This winner of Wine Works' previous Petite Sirah taste-off defies consensus on cellarability.

90 2000 Bear Creek, Lodi (\$10) – A youthful aroma of blackberry jam leaps out of the glass. Cinnamon and a mushroomy earthliness add complexity. Soft and round, drink sooner than later. A true "Best Buy."

90 1999 Biale "Old Vine," Napa Valley (\$40) - Highly extractive hue. Ultra-ripe and concentrated Marion berry and Santa Rosa Plum with woody spice and white pepper. Engaging mocha surfaces mid-to-late palate. Full bodied and persistent. Sourced from some of the oldest Petite Sirah vines in Napa. Aging potential notwithstanding, why wait?

90 1999 Madrigal, Napa Valley (\$25) – Depth and intensity. Layers of opulent black fruit. Round and plush with elevating acidity. Chalky tannins lend a well-integrated chew factor mid to late palate. Visceral, yet heady and viable to beyond 2010.

90 1999 Markham, Napa Valley (\$29) – Deeply opaque. Fragrant, brambly wild berry and dill titillate the olfactory. Bright, prolonged fruit profile with mixed pepper and brown spice in a richly textured frame. Well balanced with substantial aging potential.

90 1999 Stags' Leap Winery, Napa (\$31) – Profligate, juicy black fruit highlighted with cinnamon, orange zest and toasty oak notes. Layers of depth featuring black cherry cola interlaced with espresso and dark chocolate mid-to-late palate and punctuated by a long, peppery finish. Buy a case and celebrate a bottle a year.

90 2000 Steven Ross, Napa Valley (\$32) – Spice and leather accessorize this lush black cherry and cassis ensemble. Effusive yet harmonious, with a velvety mouthfeel portending longevity.