

Sounds French, but fear not - it's all-American

By Jeff Wicklund
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This year's celebration of our country's independence (230th edition) should include a special wine that, in many ways, embodies the all-American spirit: big, bold and rich in color, with enough grip to suggest carrying a big stick, yet potentially polished and velvety smooth.

P.S. I love you. I'm talking about the often confusing, California-adopted grape variety petite sirah. The confusion stems from the nomenclature (the spelling can differ - (petit sirah, petite syrah, petit syrah) and the association to the noble Rhone syrah (a hugely popular grape in Washington).

More confusion comes because the majority of vineyard plantings (primarily in California) which were identified as petite sirah were actually field blends peppered with other vines such as alacante bouchet, grenache, mourvedre or zinfandel. Most of these plantings were made before the 1960s, when vintners were mainly concerned with copious production of fermented grape juice that could be generically labeled "Hearty Burgundy."

The facts are that petite sirah is an offspring of syrah and an obscure southern French variety, peloursin. Back in the 1860s, a French nurseryman, Francois Durif, propagated the grape, trying for a grape resistant to powdery mildew, and named it after himself. The wines made from this hybrid didn't produce quality juice in France, and the grape was ignored to extinction.

Fast forward to California in the '60s and '70s when varietally labeled wines were taking off, and petite sirah had a new adopted home. By the 1990s, Carole Meredith at the University of California, Davis did DNA testing on petite sirahs and concluded that the majority of these vines were indeed Durif.

But, given the unique characteristics of "shiraz" in Australia, which gives credible validation to calling these wines something different than its genetic twin syrah, I think that we Americans can claim petite sirah as our own. So, for this Fourth of July celebration, let's raise a glass of red (may I suggest a dry rose), white (sauvignon blanc), and an inky, dark-blue (P.S. I love you).



Here's a list of some of my favorite Petite Sirahs:

P.S. Some of these wines may require a bit of searching but will be a rewarding find.

Bogle 2004 Petite Sirah \$10

Readily available in both retail and is a popular wine for many restaurants, this is the workhorse of petite sirahs. Also a wine with some heritage in fact, Bogle considers petite sirah as its "Heritage" varietal, as it was first produced in 1978. This wine comes out of the glass swinging, with a dark purple color and juicy blackberry, boysenberry and pepper fragrances with a hint of herbs. On the palate the wine is a mouthful of jammy black fruits and quite a backbone for a wine of such a modest tariff. Great for summer grilling.

Concannon 2004 Petite Sirah \$15

This is a full-bodied, rich and intense wine. It exhibits full soft tannins and primary fruit flavors of cherry, dark berry and blueberry. Secondary flavors of chocolate and cassia are complex with hints of toast and creamy oak. This petite sirah is a wine that is delicious now, and also has tremendous potential if aged.

Lava Cap 2003 Petite Sirah \$26

Wow! A powerhouse of a wine with richness and complexity to spare. Full-bodied, with spicy notes of violets, blueberries cherries, and vanilla, but with elegant balance. Rich oak flavors and full tannins make this a perfect wines for aging. This wine has won international renown for its wonderful depth and intensity of flavors.

Stags Leap Winery 2003 Petite Syrah \$37

From the look of the wine, you'd expect it to be massive on the palate, but one of the pleasures of this petite syrah is its finesse and elegance. This is an unusually complex and layered petite. The nose teems with blackberries, red currants, cut hay and burnt oranges. On the palate this sensuous wine is a mouthful of rich bitter chocolate, French vanilla, and raspberries wrapped in round, sappy tannins. It's at once fascinating and intriguing, leaving you with a reverberating finish.