

Syrah and the nomenclature caper

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Petite Sirah, sometimes spelled Petite Syrah, is a grape variety that is genetically different from Syrah. It was thought to be entirely unrelated until a recent DNA study at UC Davis by Dr. Carole Meredith proved that all Petite Sirah in California is a grape imported from France. In the late 1880s, Dr. Francois Durif made this grape by crossing Syrah and the lesser-known Peloursin. The French subsequently adopted the name Durif. It failed as a variety in France due to the cold climate and susceptibility to disease.

As a result, Americans bought it in the late 1800s thinking it was a small berried version of Syrah that they attached the name Petite to. They found that the grape has the potential to create enormous wines, especially in California's hotter regions. Ever since, the grape is responsible for wines with complex layers, spice, high alcohol, robust tannins and bodies that are so viscous as to coat the inside of the drinker's mouth with a deep red stain. Due to its distinctive and unforgettable impact on the palate, its small amount of total acres planted in the world, and its potential for years of cellar improvement, it can be a special collecting wine for some and a cultish way of life for others.