

WINE

Nothing Small About This Syrah

By Ben Giliberti

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Although you may not recognize the name of a hearty red wine called Petite Sirah, you're probably more familiar with it than you think. This is because you likely savored many, many glasses of Petite Sirah without knowing it. In fact, if you're much over 30, there's a good chance that this strapping red wine was a mainstay of your blissfully misspent youth.

At one time Petite Sirah was the main component of Gallo Hearty Burgundy, making up as much as 40 percent of the blend. In its heyday, Gallo Hearty Burgundy was the best and the most popular jug wine in America. Wines like Hearty Burgundy, called generic blends, are what Americans drank before we became a nation of varietal wine drinkers e.g., Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot. (Varietal wines are made all or mostly from a single grape variety and are usually sold under the name of the grape.) None of us had any inkling that we were drinking Petite Sirah, because in those days we didn't bother to ask what grapes were in a wine.

Today, Gallo's senior vice president of winemaking, Dr. George Thoukis, 71, still marvels at the quality of the Petite Sirah he helped crush and vinify in the '60s and '70s as aide-de-camp of the late, legendary Julio Gallo, co-founder with brother Ernest of the Gallo winery. "It was beautiful," he said, "rich deep, ripe, everything you could want in a red wine." But, he recalls somewhat wistfully, it was a wine before its time. "We never even considered putting it out as a single varietal, because that's not what people wanted back then."

Most of the Petite Sirah for Hearty Burgundy came from the Napa Valley, with lesser amounts from Sonoma County. This couldn't happen in a jug wine today, because of the premium prices demanded for grapes from these high-rent appellations. Moreover, Petite Sirah grapes are pretty scarce nowadays, because so many acres were uprooted in favor of more salable varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, in the 1980s and 1990s. (Today's Hearty Burgundy is still a reasonably good wine for the price, but it is made mostly from Zinfandel and Carignan.)

Fortunately, the legacy of Petite Sirah has not been lost. While many vineyards were displaced, about 2,500 acres of the grape are still in production in California. Recognizing its exceptional potential, a new generation of winemaker's and wine aficionados has lovingly embraced it. (Check out "PS I Love You," www.psiloveyou.org, a slick new Web site devoted to unabashed adoration of this once neglected varietal.) With some justice, the faithful growers of Petite Sirah have seen their patience rewarded. Prices per ton now rank with the highest of any grape in California.

Although it is genetically related (if not identical) to an obscure French grape called Durif, Petite Sirah is as all-American as it gets, overflowing with warm, robust charm, ideally suited to the sunny California climate. My tasting of more than a dozen current releases of Petite Sirah turned out to be a thoroughly delightful, if teeth-staining journey. .

While Petite Sirah is no longer a rarity, the selection at any given store is likely to be limited. If you are interested in a particular wine, it's best to call the store ahead of time to verify availability. Information on wholesale distribution is provided in parentheses following each wine. It is intended primarily for the use of retailers who wish to stock the wine or place a special order at your request.

OUTSTANDING

Guenoc Winery Petite Sirah 1999 "North Coast" (\$19): Coming from vineyards in Lake County, just north of Napa, this may be the most underrated wine in America. The 1999, while rich, full-bodied and deep purple as a Petite Sirah should be, has a touch of elegance that separates good from exceptional. The deep black/red berry fruit is highlighted by just the right touch of spicy new oak. As is often the case with Petite Sirah, I prefer the "regular" bottling to Guenoc's impressive, though fiercely tannic 1999 "**Serpentine**

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Meadow" Reserve bottling. (NDC)

Stags' Leap Winery Petite Sirah 1999 "Napa Valley" (\$31): Winemaker Robert Brittan's masterfully rendered 1999 Petite Sirah ranks with the finest red wines produced in Napa Valley's exclusive Stags Leap District, and that includes the ultra-expensive Cabernet Sauvignons and Merlots for which the district is best known. This powerful wine offers a subtle interplay of deep blueberry fruit, mocha chocolate and white truffle notes. Quite extraordinary now, it will be even better with two to three years in the cellar. Note: Stags' Leap Winery also offers a limited production Petite Sirah-dominated "field blend" called **Ne Cede Malis Estate Reserve** (\$50). While not superior in my opinion to the Napa Valley bottling, it offers a distinctive, more sauvage style of Petite Sirah. (Beringer Blass/Washington Wholesale)

Foppiano Vineyards Petite Sirah 2000 "Sonoma County" (\$22): Owner Louis Foppiano's credo is to make outstanding wine and sell it at a fair price, and this wine epitomizes that philosophy. Petite Sirah is Foppiano's flagship wine, and the 2000 Sonoma County bottling offers an irresistible combination of bright, complex fruit overlaying a ripe, tannic structure. Louis Foppiano is the industry's leading apostle of Petite Sirah, and his semiannual "Petite Report" is essential reading for devotees of the variety. (Visit www.Foppiano.com to obtain a copy.) To meet surging demand, Foppiano has recently introduced two additional bottlings, **Foppiano Vineyards Petite Sirah 2001 "Paso Robles"** (\$16) and **Foppiano Vineyards Petite Syrah 2001 Bacigalupi Vineyard "Russian River"** (\$17). While neither is as harmonious as the flagship Sonoma County bottling, both offer good value. (DOPS)

Markham Petite Sirah 1999 "Napa Valley" (\$29): As recompense for its disastrous 1998 Petite Sirah, Markham has truly outdone itself with this glorious bottling. Perhaps the creamiest, most luxurious Petite Sirah in this tasting, the 1999 Markham rolls across the palate with oodles of supple blackberry and cassis fruit, generously seasoned with spicy new oak. Though approachable and thoroughly enjoyable now, the abundant, soft tannins provide excellent cellaring potential. (Paterno/NDC)

Silver Ridge 2000 Petite Sirah (\$10-\$11; **Best Buy**): Though lacking the sheer scale and density of the top wines in this tasting, this offering from the Bronco Wine Company (other notable stable mate -- Two Buck Chuck), offers exceptional value. The mid-weight Petite Sirah fruit is nicely seasoned with new oak, and the wine finishes with gentle tannins. Delicious and ready now. (Bacchus)

The following wines were also tasted. Several would have merited an outstanding rating had greater attention been paid to managing Petite Sirah's Achilles' heel, excessively harsh tannins. Nevertheless, if paired with the proper food, such as charcoal-broiled steak or poultry, they will provide enjoyable imbibing. Listed in order preference: **Trentadue 2001 Petite Sirah "Alexander Valley"** (\$25); **Marietta 1999 Petite Sirah** (\$30; a huge wine, simply not my style); **Edmeades Petite Sirah 1999 Mendocino "Needlepoint Ridge"** (\$28); **Bogle 2001 Petite Sirah** (\$12; usually reliable, but the 2001 is too tannic); **Guenoc 2000 Petite Sirah "North Coast"** (\$19; lacks the stuffing of the 1999 and previous vintages of Guenoc).

Not recommended: Ramsey 1998 Petite Sirah (\$19; fading fast); Stonehedge 2001 Petite Sirah (\$10); Kempton Clark 2000 Petite Sirah (\$11; petite price, demi-petite quality).

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