

A Robust Red Goes Straight to the Point

By FRANK J. PRIAL

If it didn't have such a French-sounding name, petite sirah might have become the all-American grape we mistakenly think zinfandel to be. During the long hegemony of the jug wines, it was usually petite sirah that lent them whatever vinous character they could muster. Many a California wine sold as Burgundy or Chianti owed its modest appeal to a grape whose name never appeared on the label, the sturdy, blue-collar petite sirah.

Nowadays, although it is still often added to zinfandels for backbone, petite sirah tends to stand on its own. Noticing more bottles of petite sirah in the stores, and at higher prices than you might imagine, the Dining section tasting panel decided to examine the appeal of this once-humble grape.

As is true of zinfandel, the provenance of petite sirah was shrouded in mystery. For the longest time, it was thought to be related to an obscure French grape called the durif. Now, thanks to DNA studies by Dr. Carole Meredith, a geneticist at the University of California at Davis, we know that it is durif. A couple of wineries are even labeling their petite sirahs as durif.

Durif came from France, the offspring of syrah, the noble grape of Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, and a lesser-known variety called peloursin. By the mid-1960's, both petite sirah and zinfandel (which, by the way, comes from Croatia) had broken away from their jug-wine image and begun to establish themselves as American varietals. Zinfandel went on to stardom and indeed is the more nuanced and complex of the two. But petite sirah has its own rugged appeal and a host of loyal followers who appreciate it.

The panel's enthusiasm for petite sirah, though, was not entirely unbridled. The three regulars, Amanda Hesser, Eric Asimov and I, along with our guest, Warren Fraser, a sommelier at Washington Park, a Greenwich Village restaurant, tasted 22 wines. Four were from the 2001 vintage, five from 2000, eight from 1999, four from 1998 and one from 1997. Average price was just under \$24 a bottle.

The appeal of petite sirah is certainly not subtlety. It is intense, loud and direct, meant for food rather than for cocktail sipping, and hearty food at that.

"You need food to pull it back," said Mr. Fraser, who added that he does not have petite sirah on his restaurant's wine list.

Both Ms. Hesser and Mr. Asimov agreed. "It's a one-dimensional wine that you would enjoy having with a burger," Mr. Asimov said. But would you want to pay \$33, \$35 or even \$60 for a burger wine?

I think that petite sirah does better work as a blending grape than on its own, though I did find some wines at our tasting that had the characteristics of a good Rhone.

Petite sirah has found a home in California, where it thrives from Mendocino to the Mexican border. Just for fun, we included a bottle from south of that border in our exercise: a 1999 from L.A. Cetto, a winemaker in the Guadalupe Valley in Baja California. The price was right — \$9 — but the wine, though some of us liked

its fruit, failed to make our Top 10 chart. But then again, to my surprise at least, the most expensive wine in the tasting, a \$60 bottle of 1999 Chiarello Roux Old Vine, didn't make it either. Michael Chiarello is the chef and an owner at Tra Vigne, a popular Napa Valley restaurant.

Top scorer, with three stars, was the one 1997 in the group, from Lorca Wines, in the Napa Valley. This was a big favorite with Ms. Hesser ("intense but soft and supple") and me ("balanced, long finish and a touch of elegance"). Mr. Asimov found it straightforward and unpretentious. Mr. Fraser, less impressed, found it better on the palate than on the nose. In reviewing the wine earlier this year, The Minneapolis Star Tribune called it "dark and sinister, the way a good petite sirah should be."

Our best value was a 2001 Foppiano Vineyards (\$14.50) from the Paso Robles region. We gave it two and a half stars. Mr. Asimov called it "intense and spicy," Ms. Hesser liked the "citrus and lavender" aromas and Mr. Fraser liked it but thought it a bit young.

In fact, good petite sirah ages well. I have a magnum of the 1974 Callaway Vineyards that Ely Callaway gave me in 1976 with orders not to open it for 30 years. Expect a full report in 2007.

It was heartening to see a Foppiano Vineyards petite sirah do well in our roundup. The Foppianos, whose winery is in Healdsburg in Sonoma County, have been champions of this variety since their first bottling of it in 1964. They publish a semiannual Petite Report, the most recent edition of which listed 62 producers of the wine in California.

It is possible that one approaches these wines with their elegant Rhone forebear, syrah, in mind. It's difficult not to, given the close family connection. Great syrah, or even not-so-great syrah, will almost always come out ahead. Petite sirah tends to be one-dimensional and unsubtle; syrah is, or should be, richer, more elegant, more challenging. It is quite likely that many of these wines will improve with a little age, even the ones we enjoyed the most. Note that the highest scorer was the oldest, with five years in the bottle.

Tasting Report: With Petite Sirah, Lots of Oak and Plenty of Fruit

Lorca Napa Valley 1997

\$30

Beautiful balance, a long finish and a touch of elegance, Frank J. Prial said. Eric Asimov found it straightforward and unpretentious, with a lot of fruit. To Amanda Hesser, it was simultaneously big and intense, yet soft and supple. Better on the palate than on the nose, Warren Fraser said.

BEST VALUE

Foppiano Paso Robles 2001

\$14.50

**** 1/2**

Intense and spicy, Asimov said. Prial called it big, bruising and full-bodied. Fraser liked the wine but found it too young. Hesser detected a nice range of aromas, including citrus and lavender.

Rosenblum Cellars Napa Valley Pickett Road 2000

\$20

**** 1/2**

One of Asimov's favorites — he found it deep and rich with a long finish. Hesser called it both jammy and dainty. Prial tasted good fruit and tame tannins, while Fraser said it improved as it opened up.

Guenoc North Coast 1999**\$19****** 1/2**

The panelists all liked the way the oak added complexity without smothering flavors. It reminded Fraser of a good Rhone wine, while Hesser called it well balanced. Smooth with depth and an attractive finish, Prial said. Asimov liked the way it came alive in the mouth.

Girard Napa Valley 2000**\$24********

Oaky at first, Asimov said, but he felt it opened up to reveal spicy fruit flavors. Prial also found spiciness, and detected something soft in the wine — maybe merlot, he guessed. Fraser and Hesser both found it a straightforward and one-dimensional wine.

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Napa Valley 1998**\$40********

Hesser found it earthy and balanced, and liked the tartness. Fraser, too, called it tart, but said it was out of whack. Prial described it as intense but restrained and liked the balance. Asimov was dismayed by a lack of fruit.

Bogle Vineyards California 2001**\$10********

It reminded Fraser of a Provençal wine, with a lot of richness. Prial described it as big and harsh, with a long finish, and said it was what he expected from these wines. Asimov called it as sweet as a cherry-vanilla lollipop. Hesser, too, found the cherry and vanilla flavors cloying.

Imagery Estate Winery Artist Collection Paso Robles 2000**\$35***** 1/2**

Prial found pleasant aromas and a bit of complexity. Asimov called it mellow and peppery, and even tasted blackberries. Tastes too young, Hesser said, and Fraser felt it got better with air.

Hecker Pass Winery Santa Clara Valley 1999**\$20***** 1/2**

Asimov really liked this wine, comparing it to a Coleman Hawkins saxophone solo. Hesser found not “Body and Soul,” but body and fruit, with an attractive vegetal touch. But Prial and Fraser were both put off by that flavor, which Fraser called “bell pepperish.”

Markham Vineyards Napa Valley 1998**\$19***** 1/2**

Decent fruit, well made, but too much oak, Hesser said. The others agreed, though Fraser found a nice finish. Prial called it heavy handed, and Asimov described it as dense and loud.