

Legal Times

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Shy Syrah

Petite syrah gets little attention, but don't ignore it.



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Petite syrah is a varietal that doesn't garner a lot of attention. You're unlikely to hear of anyone selling petite syrah futures or to find rare bottles auctioned off by Christie's. And life is too short to see these wines achieve any type of cult status. Petite syrah is like spinach. You wouldn't ask for it as your last meal. On the other hand, if it was made well, you might fancy some every once in a while.

Getting petite syrah into your glass is another problem. It requires some effort to locate these interesting but obscure wines. When I was searching the greater D.C. area for bottles, I found that I had to scan the highest and dustiest shelves. So why should you bother? Because the flavors of a petite syrah dovetail so beautifully with hearty tomato-based sauces, blackened-fish dishes, rich cheeses, and robust courses like game, beef, and lamb.

Ideally, a petite syrah is intensely tannic, deep purple, and exhibits wonderful aromas of blackberry, blueberry, and a hint of pepper. Petite syrah ages well and can mature for a decade after the vintage into a complex, smooth, elegant wine.

Lately, some 70 wineries in California have taken a liking to this grape. Affectionately known as Petite Producers, they have planted 3,200 acres of vines in California. Still, petite syrah has an identity problem to overcome. One thing that throws consumers off track is that this wine is not genetically related to nor does it have flavors similar to the classic syrah of the Rhone Valley. The lineage of the petite syrah grape (also spelled sirah) may be muddled, but we know that it's related to the Rhone grape known as durif.

The following is a sampling of what is available locally: David Bruce 2000 Central Coast Petite Syrah, Foppiano Vineyards Russian River Valley Sonoma Petite Sirah, Trentadue Winery 2000 Alexander Valley Petite Sirah, Pedroncelli Winery 1999 Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah, Lava Cap 1999 Granite Hill Reserve Petite Sirah, Guenoc 1997 Petite Sirah North Coast...