

Cork & Bottle:

How to buy, taste and store
wine and spirits

Uncorked: Petite sirah is
small in name only

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Published January 25, 2006



Old-vine petite sirah is popular with wine tasters at **Michael-David Vineyards** in Lodi, Calif. The winery calls its petite **"Earthquake."**

Most wine shops have dusty hideaways beyond the proud ranks of France, Italy and Germany, deep in the California section. Go past the shoulder-to-shoulder cabernets, the smiling merlots and preening pinot noirs.

You'll find the unmarked home of other reds, or in rare bursts of enterprising signage "Alternative" or "Interesting Reds."

A better name would be undiscovered gold. Go there now.

There's great stuff there and great buys, forgotten maybe, not forgettable. Some of the most unusual wines, orphans and heirlooms of early vineyards and experimental plantings of malbec or tannat, are still looking for fans.

The best is still in hiding, a century-old wine called petite sirah, the most overlooked value in California. Even if you don't know the name, I'll bet you've tasted it and loved it, sometimes as a bit of extra gumption, ripeness and deep purple blended into zinfandel and even big-shot cabernets.... Petite sirah is not syrah or shiraz, although it is a direct descendant straight from the Rhone. Nor is it petite. Petite sirah is big, really big, from the juiciest of grapes, like a water balloon filled to bursting with grape and cherry jam.

It has spice and pepper, plenty of guts. So much that wine writers and fans, I plead guilty, have apologized for its frivolous name and introduced it as a John Wayne of wines. That makes it sound like too much of a tough guy when one of its trademarks is charm, even silky smoothness. Let's recast with Clint Eastwood or Steve McQueen.

"It has intense tannins, deep color and a lot of acid, but is so well balanced with all this fruit, that it doesn't come out hot (with too much alcohol) or 'furrish' (with tannin)," explained **Bill Regan**, the winemaker at **Foppiano**. The **Foppianos** have bottled petite as a varietal for 30 years, and now have it in a third of their Healdsburg vineyards, which produce 10,000 to 20,000 cases a year.

Make its acquaintance now, because this petite sirah is bred for chilly evenings, thick pork chops, legs of lamb, beef stews, grilled sausage and stout cheeses. (Florida has plenty of months for salmon and pinot noir.)

In the last five years wineries making petite under its own name have jumped from 60 to more than 240 wineries, from the flagship of **Bogle's** fighting \$10 varietals to **Stag's Leap's** top-dollar version. At **Robert Mondavi Jr.'s** new **Spellbound** winery there are only three wines, leading with petite sirah.

Many wineries also make petite a key element, the dark sweet heart, of the best modern contemporary proprietary blends... These new reds are descendants of old California field blends and new Rhone trends, inexpensive workhorse grapes augmented with varietals from southern France.

Petite sirah was an early and hardworking part of that gang. It was created in the late 19th century by the French botanist Durif, who crossed syrah with another old black grape called peloursin.

The result was a tough new strain with big clusters of small grapes with thick skins, all the better for color and tannin. It became a staple there as Durif and migrated across the Atlantic where early in the 20th century it changed its name to petite syrah and eventually replaced the y to become petite sirah.

In California, the grape had been imported, like many others, to blend with the state's main grape of the 19th century. Syrah itself hadn't blended well, says Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards. But when petite sirah arrived in the 1880s, it was a natural mate. "It was the the perfect "complexing' complement for zinfandel," he says.

And Napa was a perfect home, although the grape eventually grew in warm regions all over the state. In 1970 it was the dominant red grape there before the valley turned to cabernet sauvignon. Today, the best petite sirah is so scarce and in demand that winemakers pay cabernet prices, \$3,000 a ton, for petite to blend into other wines.

It survived the phylloxera crisis and grew easily in warm areas from northern Sonoma through Napa and the Central Valley as far south as Paso Robles.

Petite is an old favorite and new pride in Lodi where the days heat up to 95-plus and the weather is clean and dry. So the grapes can ripen long into rich concentration and punchy with 14 to 15 percent alcohol.

Lodi's **Michael-David Winery**, which has grown grapes for six generations, released its first petite sirah in 2001, such a powerful blockbuster they named it Earthquake.

Despite plebeian origins, petite has been a darling of the smart nobility of California winemakers such as **David Bruce**, Paul Draper, **Kent Rosenblum** and Helen Turley.

Even a small percent of petite punches up any other wine with ripe flavor and as much color as a spill of Juicy Juice Cherry on an ivory carpet. So if petite is not in big letters, you'll find it in fine print, but the diminutive profile won't last.

Since **Concannon** made the first bottle that declared itself plainly to be petite sirah, the grape has inspired many to boasting. In modern times, to make petite is to champion it.

Concannon now hosts an annual **Blue Tooth Tour**, a road show featuring a dozen versions of this inky wine. Five years ago, Foppiano started an annual symposium for winemakers to compare notes on winemaking and brand building. One result is a new fan club of producers, growers and drinkers named "**P.S., I Love You.**"

I suspect you will, too.

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[Last modified January 24, 2006, 09:10:05]