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WINE Q& A: What Distinguishes Syrah From Shiraz

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What is the difference between syrah and shiraz? Although they taste different to me, the salesperson at the wine shop insists they are exactly the same grape. Someone else told me that shiraz is actually a completely different variety called petite sirah. Can you help me? I am totally confused.

Technically, the salesperson is right, as syrah and shiraz are in fact different names for the same grape. But that's not quite the whole story. Increasingly, wineries are using "syrah" to signal wines made in a classic style similar to a northern Rhone red and "shiraz" to suggest the extravagantly fruity style of Australia, where the shiraz terminology originated. While there are exceptions, Rhone-style syrah usually requires a few years of cellaring to reach its peak, while the Australian shiraz style, frequently topped off with a dollop of spicy new oak, is soft and ready to drink tonight. Having two names is a good idea, because, as you have noticed, it's hard to believe that the same grape can make two wines with such a different impression on the palate.

Petite sirah is genetically related to syrah/shiraz, but it is now recognized as a different variety called durif, which originated in France in the late 1800s when syrah was crossed with peloursin. Despite what the name implies, petite sirah is anything but a small scale version of syrah. (Petite refers to the relative size of the grape, not the flavor.) While syrah/shiraz is dominated by easygoing red fruit and berry flavors, petite sirah serves up an imposing wall of chewy mocha-black fruit, highlighted by fig and blueberry notes. While these flavors are delectable, what makes petite sirah a true Grand Cru grape is its structure, which is girded by tannins that are smooth enough allow it to be enjoyed in its youth, yet firm enough to permit it to mellow for 10 or more years without losing the vibrancy of its fruit or drying out.

Although I definitely enjoy syrah/shiraz, I must confess that I absolutely adore petite sirah and hope that you will savor this knockout varietal for yourself. Typically selling for \$25 or less, petite sirah is among the best red wine values on the market today. Moreover, the bold fruit of this varietal make it a match made in heaven for charcoal grilled steaks and chops, something important to remember now that outdoor weather is here. The following petite sirah are highly recommended.

Rosenblum Cellars 2004 Petite Sirah Heritage Clones: (\$25) Opaque blue purple in color, this thrilling wine offers a lovely inner core of violets and blueberries and finishes with a chorus of ripe, round tannins. Superb.

Parducci 2003 Petite Sirah Mendocino County: (\$10-\$12) A sensational bargain, this luscious, deep purple wine glows with intense flavors of black fruit accented with a touch of clove and finishes with smooth, mouth-filling tannins. Match with similarly hefty foods, such as steak and charcoal-grilled poultry.

Lolonis 2002 Orpheus Petite Sirah Heritage Vineyards: (\$30) This organically grown wine, made from 50-year-old vines in the Redwood Valley area of California, offers the pure, natural flavors of petite sirah unencumbered by excessive oak. Balanced and delicious.

*** PSILY Member Shannon Ridge was also mentioned as vineyard fruit used by a California producer ***