

## Don't be fooled by the name: Petite sirah is big - Jennifer Rosen

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In the mirror, my grin reveals the darkly pitted teeth common to natives of lands untouched by modern dentistry. Even the upper veneers, supposedly immune, are stained deep purple. That's just one of the risks of tasting a lot of petite sirah.

Others include a numb mouth and staggering dizziness, despite having spat every drop. What's up with this wine?

Let's start with the name. No, it's not a typo. You're probably familiar with the lighter, redder syrah, although you might call it shiraz, as Aussies do. Either way, it's a different grape.

Petite sirah (note the "i") is one of those stealth grapes, like carmenere in Chile and zinfandel in California, both of which were mistaken for something they weren't until exposed by DNA tests. Yes, when DNA isn't busy solving murders and tracing family trees, it's hard at work sorting out wine-grape confusion.

Petite sirah turns out to be the offspring of syrah and a very old variety from France's Rhone valley called pelousin. The cross is also known in some places as Durif, after the French nurseryman who bred it.

In the 1890s it migrated to America, where it was quite popular. Many wines in those days were field blends, made from a handful of varieties growing together in one vineyard. Even today, many old vineyards supposedly containing, say, zinfandel or cab are really full of weird mixtures.

Come Prohibition, most vineyards were pulled up, except when the owners negotiated good contracts with the church. Somehow, the amendment coincided with an enormous unexplained rise in the number of regular, Communion-taking churchgoers.

Others survived by selling grapes for juice or the suddenly popular "flavorings," often sold in casks, suitable for fermentation. Grapes were shipped around the country in boxcars, fresh, as juice and as concentrate. Also available: dehydrated "bricks" labeled with the stern warning "Do NOT add this to 5 gallons of warm water, and do NOT add 10 pounds of sugar and yeast, or it will become wine, which would be ILLEGAL!"

Cross-country trips in unrefrigerated rail cars could get so hot that in many cases the grapes probably were wine by the time they arrived. The thick-skinned PS held up better than most. Another factor was tannins, also contained in skins, which act as a preservative.

It also can act as sandpaper if you're not careful. Early petites could be brutal on the mouth and the throat, but now hand-harvesting and wood aging produce much smoother wines with better mouth-feel and balance.

The extra-gifted PS has long been a good blending grape for punching up flavor, body and color when other grapes get watery. In fact, rumor has it PS was a key ingredient of Gallo's Hearty Burgundy.

Concentrated flavor also comes from extra ripeness, and PS, which thrives in hot climates, gets pretty ripe. More sun means more sugar in the grape, and sugar is what gets fermented into alcohol. Hence my dizziness. Most of the PS's I tasted list 14.5 to 15.5 percent alcohol - pretty high to begin with, without even considering the 1 percent leeway allowed. Wines closer to 17 percent can have more in common with port than with table wine.

All in all, it's an intense experience. You can learn more at [www.psiloveyou.org](http://www.psiloveyou.org). But first, buy some really good toothpaste.

Recommended petite sirah

- Bogle Petite Sirah Clarksburg 2004 \$11
- Parducci Mendocino County Petite Sirah 2003 \$12
- Rosenblum Cellars Petite Sirah "Heritage Clones" 2004 \$25
- Vina Robles Jardine 2003 \$26

Jester@corkjester.com