

# Decanter

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Stateside



## NORM ROBY

### Petite Sirah makes a big splash

**F**ORTY YEARS AGO, Concannon Vineyard in Livermore released a 1961 Petite Sirah, the first to be labelled and sold under that varietal in the US. For years this grape was thought to be Durif, a lowly Rhône red. But DNA analysis has since revealed its parents to be Syrah and Peloursin.

Historically, Petite Sirah goes way back to California's early days. It was often the backbone of basic full-bodied reds created as a blend with Zinfandel, Carignane and Alicante Bouchet.

Then Concannon brought Petite Sirah out of obscurity. A big-bodied wine, it is also highly tannic and a long ager. Up through the early 1980s many winemakers worked hard to produce bold Petite Sirah before it fell out of favour and was replaced by Merlot and Syrah. Typically, whenever vineyards are pulled up, a few diehards will stick with a variety, hoping to see it through the tough times. That seems to be the

case with Petite Sirah. What remains planted in California are old parcels often of exceptional character that some gritty grower refused to remove.

For its new and impressive 2000 Petite Sirah, Benziger Family Winery went to the McNab Ranch in Mendocino, a region with considerable old Petite Sirah. Concannon may have been the first, but for years the king of Petite Sirah was John Parducci, longtime Mendocino winemaker. Now in his 80s he founded a new winery and is again making Petite Sirah. Other fine Mendocino Petite Sirahs are being made by Fife, Lolonis, Pacific Star, Edmeades and McDowell Valley Vineyards.

In 2001, Madrigal Vineyards from Napa Valley created an immense Petite Sirah, loaded with berry and spice, and surprisingly tame tannins. Almost as exciting is the big, but juicy and supple 2000 Eos Reserve made from old vines in Paso Robles. Equally, the 2000 Foppiano



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Vineyards Millennium Harvest from the Russian River Valley, and Stags' Leap Winery's 2001 from Napa Valley hold nothing back. These four are making a strong case for the reinstatement of Petite Sirah as a California speciality. Given it lacks popular appeal, however, it would be naïve to suggest a huge comeback. Even at its finest, it is too big to sip casually, while its black pepper and Worcestershire sauce notes offer too much character to enjoy at picnics and light meals.

Norm Roby is co-author of the best-selling *New Connoisseur's Handbook of Californian Wine* (Knopff).