



Petite Sirah, old and new

by Robin Garr

Petite Sirah is commonly dismissed as a “lesser” grape, but I like it. At its best it’s rich and intense, perhaps monolithic in its youth but offering a glimpse of something in its depths that patience and time will eventually reveal.

Opening a bottle of it can be like uncorking a taste of California history, although the grape is actually a “modern” cross of true Syrah and the ancient French variety Peloursin, developed in 1880 in Southern France. That’s only a short time back by the standard of grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Syrah, which go back to medieval times and beyond.

The variety - originally named Durif after its inventor - picked up its common name when it came to California a few years later. (The full story of Petite Sirah and its origins is available online in an intriguing timeline by Louis M. Foppiano, with commentary by the wine-grape scientist Dr. Carole Meredith, on the informative Website, “P.S. I Love You.”)

As I wrote in a quick survey of another Petite Sirah last year, the grape has never been dominant in California but has remained an important niche player. Many of its plantings, and arguably the best, are ancient, dry-farmed vines, some of them in patches going back to the late 1800s, most of which have been found to be “field blend” combinations of Durif, Peloursin, true Syrah, Zinfandel and Carignan.

Today we’re tasting a Petite Sirah from one of the first California wineries to grow and make it. Langtry Estate & Vineyards was founded in 1888 in Lake County’s Guenoc Valley, north of Napa, by a flamboyant British actress named Lillie Langtry, who declared her wine the “greatest claret in the country” and, by 1900, had a shelf full of medals and trophies to prove it. She sold the winery in 1906, and it closed during Prohibition. After a half-century of neglect, new owners brought it back in the 1960s.

Guenoc Valley was declared an American Viticultural Area (“AVA”) in 1981, and it remains one of the world’s few wine appellations that has only a single producer.

Langtry Estate produces higher-end wines under its own name; today’s tasting features the Petite Sirah from its “Guenoc Lake Country” line, wines made by Langtry with purchased grapes and generally very good values. The 2005 Guenoc Lake County Petite Sirah, reviewed below, is 100 percent Petite Sirah, aged in a combination of French and American oak barrels.

Guenoc 2005 Lake County Petite Sirah (\$16.99)

Inky blackish-purple with a dark garnet edge, shines like patent leather in the glass. Dark, plummy fruit, black and blue berries, pleasant if a bit restrained on the nose. Ripe and mouth-filling; black fruit is shaped by sufficient acidity for balance; gentle tannic astringency appears in the finish. A bit on the soft and smooth side for Petite Sirah, which can be harshly tannic in youth, making it a good choice if you don’t want to wait out years of cellar time to try this variety. (Dec. 16, 2007)

FOOD MATCH: Like many low-end Petite Sirahs, it makes a simple “glass of red wine” and a good companion with burgers or steaks or sharp cheese. It made a decent, if offbeat, match with baked potatoes “loaded” with broccoli, bacon and cheese stoked up with a bit of chipotle chiles en adobo.

VALUE: Street prices range well under the rather spendy \$20 retail shown on the winery Website; it lists widely in the lower to middle teens. It’s a good wine, worth a reasonable toll, but it pays to shop around.

WHEN TO DRINK: Fine now for quaffing. Long-term cellaring might see it evolve into something complex and interesting, but you’ll need good storage conditions and lots of patience to wait out the years for that to happen.