

Petite Sirah, the John Wayne of Grapes

Thick-skinned, passionate, All American, Petite Sirah is the Cultivar Conundrum

By Jo Diaz

When is a cultivar not defined by its name? When it's Petite Sirah. Although the berries are petite (hence how it became so named), its flavors are neither Petite, nor is the grape Syrah. As soon as Petite Sirah is poured from a bottle to a glass, the mystery begins. This is when we witness that the wine's so big, black, bold, and beautiful that it becomes very clear (if that can happen through its inky colors) that this wine is light years away from anything petite and demure. Consequently, Petite Sirah has become the most misunderstood variety for consumers.

"Durif" (a.k.a Petite Sirah) was the name that Dr. François Durif, a French botanist at the University of Montpellier in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of southern France, gave to this cultivar. In 1880, Dr. Durif released this new variety, which had grown from a seed he extracted from fruit of the old French variety Peloursin crossed with Syrah. Dr. Durif didn't know the pollen source at the time of the crossing. In 1997, however, when Dr. Carole Meredith was actively working at the University of California at Davis, she discovered through DNA fingerprinting that Syrah is the identifiable source of the pollen that originally was crossed with Peloursin flowers.

The grape's high resistance to powdery mildew encouraged its cultivation in the early twentieth century in areas of France like Isère and Ardèche. At the time, the relatively low quality of the resulting wine caused the Durif to fall out of favor with local wine authorities, and today it's almost non-existent in France. The variety is also very prone to bunch rot, which could easily destroy a French wine grape growing region, because of its damp climate and super tight clusters that don't allow for any aeration; so, Petite Sirah is not well suited to a European climate, per se.

There's one gentleman in France today, Gilles Liège of Monistrol in the Loire, with whom I have intermittent communications. Gilles is somewhat taken aback that the history of Durif so easily left his homeland and is having such success on American soil. He is championing the



*Petite Sirah,
Petite Syrah...
however you spell it,
it's a cultivar once
in disfavor, pulled
out or grafted-over.
However, this long
misunderstood
variety is now
finding the love
from a growing
group of passionate
Petite producers.*

variety's French roots, and has taken up his own cause to have it placed back into the history and vineyards of France as a modern marvel.

According to Gilles, "I have impassioned myself to the vine. I have come to acquire old terraces in the area of Monistrol, and have the spirit to rehabilitate these dry stone terraces, which date from the end of the 19th Century. The area is very sheltered, favorable to the vines which existed in the past. Some vines were planted into Petite Sirah and other types of vines pre-phylloxera. A friend of mine in Isère is also interested in planting this type of traditional vine to this area."

At the time, Gilles was seeking seedlings of Petite Sirah, formerly planted in the area of Grésivaudan; as it happened, Kevin Morrissey of Stags' Leap Winery was headed to France. I introduced the two gentlemen; Kevin met with Gilles in France, and Gilles continues to send emails to me of his progress. Some day in the future, this will make an interesting progressive, historical read.

Spelling Bee: Is it Petite Sirah or Petite Syrah? The spelling puzzlement between Petite Sirah and Petite Syrah on bottle labels has a very simple explanation. David Bruce (David Bruce Winery), Jeff Cohn (JC Cellars), and Robert Brittan



The genetic origin of California's Petite Sirah has been traced to the Rhone's obscure Durif grape - a late 19th century crossing of Syrah and Peloursin.

(formerly of Stags' Leap Winery) have all said that they've used the "y" in Petite Syrah to honor its lineage. While that does draw meritorious attention to the lineage, it continues to confuse consumers who don't have the cultivar's history fully explained before they make their purchases. The United States government has, therefore, stepped in and declared that Petite Sirah vintners can no longer confuse wine consumers with a "y" instead of the "i." What that means to all of us is that you will eventually no longer see Petite Syrah on a label. For now, those who only have a vintage change don't have to change the "y" to "i," but any modification that changes the label in anyway whatsoever beyond vintage equals a spelling change.

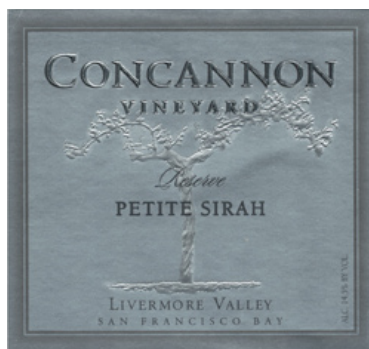
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I'll always remember David Bruce shaking his head, as he was forced to surrender to the "i" dictum. David said, "I used Petite 'Syrah' on my labels for years, because it comes from the father 'Syrah.' I just always have, and with my latest Petite Sirah, I'll have to change direction before anyone tells me to do it." Because of its complex lineage, the simplest way to understand the involvedness of Petite Sirah is to reduce it to the lowest common denominator: Petite Sirah is the Son of Syrah; there's no easier explanation.



Reflect for one moment on how a father (Syrah) and mother (Peloursin) came together to propagate an offspring (Petite Sirah). Now, reflect on your own lineage. You have to admit that although you share some similarities with your parents, you have still become a completely separate and individualistic entity, just as Petite Sirah has become a completely different cultivar.

Another example of two grape varieties that were crossed to produce another noble cultivar is the crossing of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, which gave us Cabernet Sauvignon. No one would ever mistake Cabernet Sauvignon for Cabernet Franc; however, when it was first crossed, there may have been some confusion. One can only imagine that it was explained for a few years by town criers, as is today's circumstance for Petite Sirah. [petiteSirahReserve.jpg](#)



Turning-the-Battleship-Around confusion has continued for years surrounding Petite Sirah in the United States, beginning just as soon as it was varietally labeled. In 1964, Jim Concannon of Concannon Vineyard released his first bottle of a 1961 vintage,

encouraged by southern California retailer Denny Caldwell. Denny believed that Petite Sirah could stand on its own merit; so, as an experiment, Jim delivered a few hundred cases to Denny. In no time at all, Jim reflects, "Denny had hand sold every single bottle, and came back for more." Petite production for Concannon has never stopped; in fact, current production is in the hundreds of thousands of cases.

Petite Sirah's much misunderstood history began to turn around through a grass roots movement initiated by Louis M. Foppiano of Foppiano Vineyards. It was Louis' long vision to host a Petite Sirah Symposium; and on August 4, 2002, a small core group of passionate Petite producers attended his first Noble Petite Sirah Symposium. Throughout the day, one grower and/or producer after another said over-and-over again, in utter frustration, "We need publicity for this variety. It's completely fallen off the radar screen, and our greatest challenge is to have anyone (besides us) understand what it is."

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Prior to the PS Symposium, Christine Wells, who was working with Foppiano at the time, and I had a meeting with APPELLATION



P.S. I Love You was born in 2002 as an advocacy group to get the “correct” word out on Petite Sirah. Today the PS I Love You website assists wine media in correcting misperceptions about Petite Sirah by providing a single internet resource from which they can quickly gather accurate information on the variety.

AMERICA Senior Editor Dan Berger, to discuss what he thought of Louis’ PS Symposium idea. Dan said, “Great idea, but not only should there be a symposium, there should also be a group of growers and producers, and it should be called “P.S. I Love You.” Dan planted the seed that would take shape sooner than any of us expected.

During the symposium, as I heard over and over again that we need to get the word out on this variety, I knew what had to happen next, once the dust of the symposium had settled. When I sent out the evaluation forms, I had a small question at the end of the questionnaire, “If there was a group of Petite Sirah growers and producers, would you join?” Those who said, “Yes,” were sent a registration form. I had also said to my Webmaster husband Jose Diaz, “Build us a site... They will come,” and P.S. I Love You was born on September 19, 2002, with a commitment from Louis Foppiano and a check from Kent Rosenblum. As its own varietal advocacy group, PS I Love You has helped wine media now have an Internet resource from which they can quickly gather accurate information at one location. What it is and what it isn’t is now better defined, passing these accurate facts onto consumers in featured stories. This demonstrates what a visionary marketing group and the Internet are capable of doing to turn incorrect perceptions into clarified realities. Gone are the days of misinformation, for the most part.

Imagine being plucked from your homeland shortly after being born. (Some would argue

that you were banished.) You’re brought to the Atlantic Ocean from European soils, where you board a steamship headed for America. You land at Ellis Island and are put onto the next train headed to California, and you never look back.

According to wine industry historian Charles Sullivan, Charles McIver of Linda Vista Vineyards (Mission San Jose) imported Durif to the U.S. in 1884, and coined the name “Petite Sirah.” Affection? Size of the grape? Couldn’t pronounce “Durif?” Just didn’t want the father’s name to be dropped forever because it would make it harder to tell the story? Who knows? That’s lost forever, and continues the mystery of our American legend.

What McIver is responsible for is bringing the “Wild West” its greatest “Wild Child.” And, like so many others that have made the arduous, culture-shock-filled journey, this is where Petite Sirah ultimately has flourished. It has been fully allowed to express all of its capabilities, not encumbered by what being of mixed lineage would have imposed upon its nature in France. Labeled in France as a misfit, Petite Sirah has solidly proven itself to be “the stuff that men are made of in America.” It’s durable, has strength of intensity, and the ability to weather any challenge.

Although its grapes are petite, no one is fooled. This burly, manly wine has been able to completely express its concentration of color, flavors, textures, and tannins in ways that could only be imagined in its own homeland. The American Legend... Petite Sirah.

Petite Sirah has survived phylloxera. During Prohibition, it was Petite Sirah that was used as the sacramental wine and the wine that home winemakers were being allowed to make and drink. It was also used for dried grapes that were being shipped back East as raisins for reconstituting; and, it was the grape that Napa Valley was planted to by 60 percent in the 1960s. (Today less than 2 percent of Napa acreage is devoted to P.S.) Ah, Petite Sirah... Our All-American Legend!

