

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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The All-American Grape

Forty years ago, Concannon Vineyard in Livermore Valley released a non-vintage red wine with the then-mystical name Petite Sirah.

In the four decades since, the grape variety has oft been declared a no-account low-life that's far too tannic for anyone to consume unless they want non-surgical removal of tonsils and tooth enamel.

Despite such disrespect, the beast has continued to win the hearts of literally dozens of wine makers and consumers, most of whom swear they are not certifiable masochists. Today, it is conservatively estimated that 160 California wineries make a wine from Petite Sirah.

A number of them along with

growers of this brute attended the third Petite Sirah Noble Symposium at Foppiano Vineyards this past Tuesday to trade war stories about a grape variety they all love.

In some ways, this is a grape that has nearly no flaws. And it ought to be revered on a par with the other U.S.-only grape, Zinfandel.

That's because this almost trivial French (Rhône) grape flourishes here as nowhere else on the globe.

Fact is, some of the best Zins need a dollop (wallop is more like it) of Petite Sirah to make them work. Of the wines I sampled Tuesday, almost none disappointed.

Still, the dark color and tannin-heaviness of this grape make it the

only one where the party favor from the symposium's organizers was a toothbrush.

In that way, it's a red wine for those with high pain tolerance and patience. It ages very well indeed.

See Tasting Notes (above) for comments on a few winners.

Reviews on next page. . . .

Tasting Notes

The Petite Sirahs below were sampled open this past Tuesday at the Third Annual Petite Sirah Symposium

Exceptional

2002 **Rosenblum** Petite Sirah, Napa County, Pickett Road Vineyard (\$24): Bold flavors of violet/cocoa, hints of blackberry and other exotic fruits and spices. Huge flavors and tannins, but surprisingly approachable for such a young wine. Limited. Call the winery for details: 510-865-7007.

2002 **Trentadue** Petite Sirah, Alexander Valley (\$21): Truly complex, very young wine with deep blackberry, plum, and pepper notes. Rich fruit and a complex finish. Should age at least a decade, Superb wine from Miro Tchalakov.

2001 **Madrigal** Petite Sirah, Napa Valley (\$35): Sensational ripe flavors of cherry, violet, smoke (from oak aging), and a lovely layered fruit taste that helps to keep the tannins from overpowering the finish. Limited; to order, call

winery: 707-942-6577.

2001 **Jacob Franklin** Petite Sirah, Napa Valley, Chavez/Leeds (\$32): Complex cherry, ripe currant and peppery notes with a hint of cocoa from oak aging. Less intense than some with a bit more grace. An attractive medium-term aging wine, approachable now with grilled lamb. A second label of Elyse and a wonderful, silky wine.

2002 **Christopher Creek** Petite Sirah, Russian River Valley (\$29): Blackberry, cassis and a trace of cocoa; deeply flavored, but more fruit than astringency. Almost silky in texture, an excellent wine to age three to five more years. Or try now with hamburgers.

2000 **Concannon** Petite Sirah, Livermore Valley, "Heritage" (\$36): Deep, powerful aroma of black cherry, plum, trace of pepper, and a weight that demands more bottle

age. Already four years old, and still a baby. Limited; call winery for details: 800-258-9866.

2002 **Rosenblum** Petite Sirah, Dry Creek Valley, Rockpile Road Vineyard (\$34) Black currants, white pepper, violets, and cocoa, with huge tannins and alcohol (15.3%). Some suggest it'll age 30 years; I opt for more like 6-8. Try it soon with char-grilled steaks, but only after decanting an hour.

2000 **J. Pedroncelli** Petite Sirah, Dry Creek Valley, Family Vineyards (\$14.50): Blackberry, pepper/spice and a trace of leafiness. Great value.

2001 **Kendall-Jackson** Petite Sirah, California (\$12): Classy ripe cherry/plum aroma with hints of pepper and currants. Soft and generous, a consistent great value. Tasting room only: 707-571-8100.

Wine of the Week

2002 **Foppiano** Vineyards Petite Sirah Russian River Valley, Bacigalupi Vineyard (\$17.50): Racy exotic plum, violet, and jam notes, with fairly expressive fruit in the mouth, and a tannin structure that is a lot more inviting than astringent. Needs game or grilled steaks to enjoy now, but will age nicely. From older vines and a long-time producer of what the owner still calls "petty sara." Excellent value in a deeply flavored red wine.

Bargain of the Week

2002 **Bogle** Petite Sirah, California (\$10): Slightly herbal aroma adds interest to plum jam and black cherry complexity. A blend of fruit from Lodi and Clarksburg, and always a great value.

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