

There is Nothing Petite or Dainty About the Petite Sirah Grape

By Sandy Block, MW

And it's not remotely Syrah either, although there is a genetic relation. So right off the bat the name throws most people off the trail as to the kind of wine it makes. But the grape, which used to be considered just cheap "workhorse" blending material, better suited for beefing up other reds rather than standing alone, has emerged from the shadows. To the extent that now there is a California marketing organization, "P.S. I Love You", dedicated to enhancing its reputation and generally advocating its virtues. We're not quite talking cult just yet, although there is a strong still somewhat underground current of interest, particularly among younger consumers. Petite Sirah has been around for a long time, at least since the late 19th Century, so there is the heritage angle as well.

You'll hear California grape growing veterans refer to their "Petty Sarah" vines, of which there are more than a few ancient pre-Prohibition patches throughout the state. The truth is there used to be considerably more Petite Sirah planted than there is now, but on the other hand there is three times more now than there was 10 years ago, as grass roots interest has continued developing. Thirty years ago 14,000 acres of Petite Sirah covered the state, 10 years ago 2000 and today upwards of 6000 (compared, for instance, to 18,000 Syrah, 51,000 Zinfandel and 77,000 Cabernet Sauvignon currently). This partly reflects an upsurge in red wine consumption, but it also shows the industry's response to what is perceived as a desire for exciting alternative flavors. It also reflects the fact that Petite Sirah continues to be a major component of many Zinfandel and Syrah blends, used to bolster color and flavor. To me it's easy to define what I find appealing about Petite Sirah: it's that purplest most opaque and extreme of grape varieties, with distinctive masses of rich black fruit extract, and

it makes a wine that is a joy to encounter in blind tastings because it's so easy to begin identifying on color alone. It's also one of those heavy duty, macho kind of rugged reds that doesn't cost much money. So this season, given what appears to be happening in the economy, there may be even more interest than in past years.

One of the reasons that Petite Sirah is broadening its appeal is the fact that it is always full flavored, but surprisingly versatile in structure. Few of the wines have much acid, so they can be a bit scary to a classically tuned European palate, and they do tend to tip the scales in alcohol, with full body and sometimes a punishing burn, but the tannin levels are all over the place. There are juicy, softer examples you could drink by themselves, as well as those that are big, gritty and seemingly in need of some rare red meat to balance their rustic leathery impact on your palate. What of the relation with Syrah, to which most California Petite Sirah bears no resemblance? DNA testing has shown that the two genetic parents are Syrah and an obscure southern French grape known as Peloursin, which created the grape Durif, a legal synonym for Petite Sirah. The accepted history is that it was propagated in about 1880 because of resistance to mildews and molds then plaguing French vineyards, and after being introduced to California shortly thereafter, that it has evolved off into its own style and direction. The picture may, however, be a bit blurrier than that. According to Sean Thackrey, a visionary California winemaker whose Petite Sirah is generally among the finest in the state, the nomenclature and the heritage is more complicated than we might otherwise assume. Originally the name "Petite Syrah" was used in California only as a synonym for the top quality small berry clone of Syrah whose cuttings were brought from Hermitage in the Northern



Rhone. The name now, he contends, is applied very loosely to a lot of miscellaneous genetically diverse vines that share little in common other than dark color. Classically what has been called Petite Sirah is a tight clustered, dense, large berried variety, although there do appear to be exceptions according to where it is planted. Without question, some of the older Petite Sirah vines in the state include a percentage of Peloursin, one of its parents, which looks almost indistinguishable, but produces a less intense wine. The variety, in all guises, likes dry weather and requires substantial heat to ripen, although unremitting sunshine can shrivel and raisin the grapes. It is reliable in the vineyard, with healthy yields, and adapts well to a variety of soil.

There are some amazing, and quite expensive, Petite Sirahs that have all the pedigree of the top Syrah and Zinfandel bottlings (Ridge is a fantastic source) but here are the ones that stood out, in ascending order of preference, during my most recent tastings in the moderate price range.

PARDUCCI "TRUE GRIT"
MENDOCINO, 2004

This wine shows some fine-scented leafy, floral grapey aromatic complexity, with alternating road tar and peppery accents. It's also interesting on the palate, the velvety textures and juicy black fruit balancing off rough tannins that can be magnified by its substantial alcohol. Not for the lightweight wine drinker, this needs to be served at slightly cooler temperatures or the alcohol will evaporate and dominate the deliciously intense plummy fruit flavors. The grapes are harvested from two vineyards in Mendocino, the wild and woodsy North Coast agricultural county some consider Petite Sirah's heartland in the state. \$21

HUNTINGTON
CALIFORNIA, 2005

One of the best values in Petite Sirah I've tasted in a long time, this wine won the tasting hands down, showing that you don't always have to pay a lot for quality. The aroma is smoky and blackberry like, with real definition and spice. It's thick and smooth, with grilled plums and the smoky oak flavor notes continuing. What's most impressive is its silky texture and toned down alcohol. The tannins are in the softer more fine-grained mode even though the wine's apparently been blended with 12% Cabernet Sauvignon. An extra bonus is the sweet berry jam and spice finish. Just a delight, with or without food, although I could imagine lighter fare working with this as well as the more traditional slow-cooked and earthy dishes I would normally recommend with Petite Sirah. \$11

BOGLE
CALIFORNIA, 2005

This is my favorite of the tasting, leaving price out of the equation entirely. From the inviting nose (earthy, leathery, coffee-like, leafy and floral) to the lush, unctuous texture and the chocolate caramel edged jammy fruit flavors, it's a sensually appealing delight. It actually comes across as moderate in style, with good tannin and alcohol, but also quite a bit of fruit extract to lend balance. Blended primarily from Delta fruit, the wine wins you over not on the basis of pure unbridled power, but its lavish flavor appeal. \$13

