

BIRMINGHAM Eccentric

WINNERS OF STATE AND NATIONAL AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE

www.hometownlife.com

THURSDAY
July 5, 2007

Written by Eleanor & Ray Heald

If you're still confused about syrah and shiraz being the same variety, don't let this column about petite sirah confuse you further. Do, however, let these big and powerful red wines tantalize your palate.

In California for many years, petite sirah was the mystery grape. Apparently, mystery grapes made into wine don't fare well among today's consumers as the following stats detail. In 1976, petite sirah acreage in California peaked at 14,000 acres. By 1995, it had dropped to 2,400. Today, though, interest is again on the rise. That's because it's no longer a mystery grape.

In 1997 Dr. Carole Meredith, professor emerita at the Department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of California, and her research team determined that petite sirah is the same as the French variety durif. In 1983, the same research unit using DNA paternity analysis methods, just like those used with humans, determined that syrah is the father of petite sirah and thus it's related to the true syrah of France's Rhone Valley.

Impressive research, but what do varietally-labeled petite sirah wines taste like?

PETITE SIRAH TASTES

First, petite sirah does a heck of a lot better in California than in France under either alias. Independent of appellation, California versions are deep-colored, full bodied wines with a dollop of tannins which can either come off as burly and rustic or big and round.

Burly petites are not to our liking. The discrepant word association is bothersome as is the bitterness of high tannin levels. We're excited by those petite sirahs that are powerful expressions of dark fruits but with a more finesseful finish.

In search of the latter, we did a focus tasting of 30 petite sirah bottlings from many regions of California. They ranged in price from \$8 to \$55. The following are highly recommended, listed by region and price.

Best of the Best: 2004 Epiphany
Rodney's Vineyard, Santa Ynez Valley \$30

Lake and Mendocino

2005 Guenoc \$20
2004 Marr Cellars \$25
2004 Rosenblum Redwood Valley Rhodes Vineyard \$25

Lodi and Livemore

2004 Mettler \$20
2004 Earthquake \$28
2004 Concannon Reserve \$30
2004 Silkwood \$39
2004 Concannon Heritage \$50
Napa Valley and Neighbors
2005 Girard Napa Valley \$28
2005 Rosenblum Pickett Road \$35
2004 Stags' Leap \$38
2005 Ballentine Fig Tree Vineyard \$35

Paso Robles and Central Coast

2004 Concannon Limited Release \$14
2004 EOS \$18
2004 EOS Reserve \$25 (big structure)
2004 Vina Robles Jardine Vineyard \$26
2003 EOS cupa Grandis \$55

Russian River Valley

Foppiano \$23

Food Pairings

The following foods make excellent matches with Petite Sirah: grilled rack of lamb with sauteed wild mushrooms; grilled lamb chops with a cherry sauce; barbecue baby back ribs with a chipotle sauce; a big juicy steak and sharp cheeses.

www.psiloveyou.org