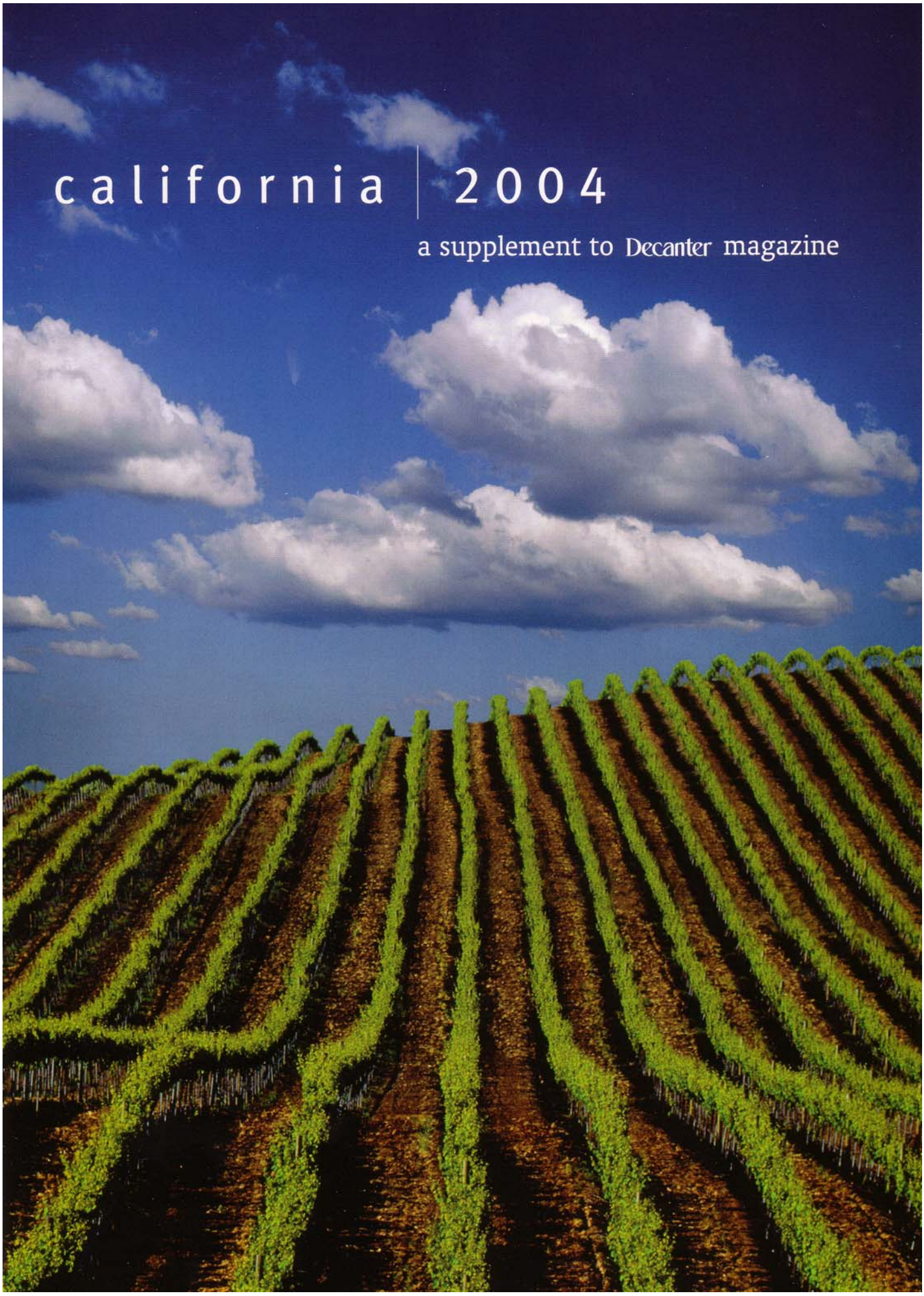

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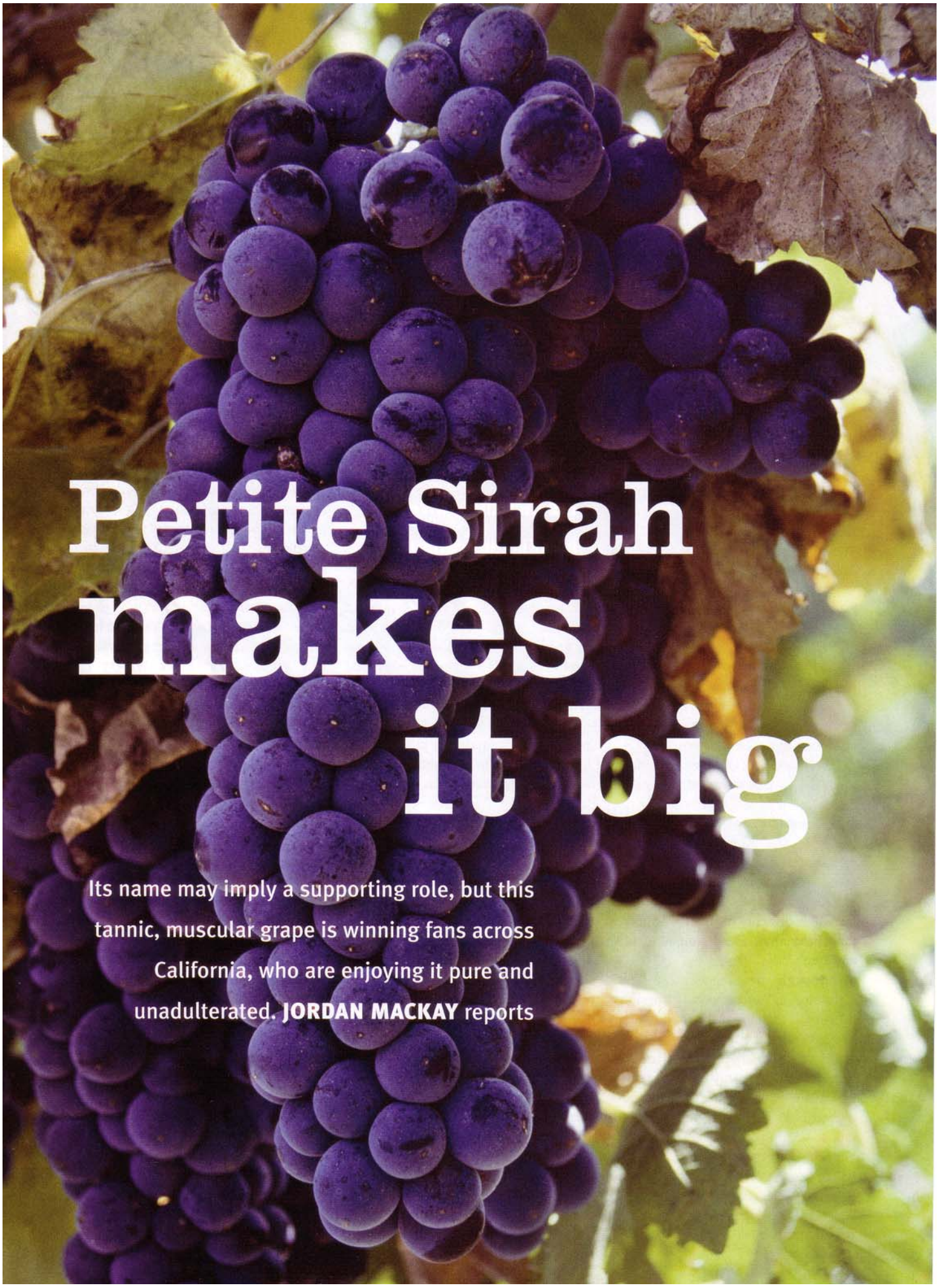

Petite Sirah makes it big

Its name may imply a supporting role, but this tannic, muscular grape is winning fans across California, who are enjoying it pure and unadulterated. **JORDAN MACKAY** reports

WHILE THE DEBATE du jour in California appears to be whether Pinot Noir or Syrah is the variety of the moment, an old workhorse grape with a demure name and powerful punch is enjoying a quiet but fervent revival. Petite Sirah makes wines which, like California's new governor, are muscular, brawny, often a bit simple, yet capable of displaying surprising nuance. But that's where the political analogy ends. For while California the state, over the few years before Arnie's arrival, descended into fiscal ruin, Petite Sirah has almost doubled its planted acreage.

Its reputation for rusticity is even being revised by a slew of expensive, slick new wines. And the number of producers making Petite Sirah has grown too, from only 60 a few years ago to around 150. Now it's got its own annual symposium and a newsletter, the *Petite Report* (both thanks to Foppiano vineyards); a roadshow called the Blue Tooth Tour, and even a preciously named 'advocacy group', PS I Love You.

It's easy to see why it's coming back. The new wines are approachable, yet with their dark opacity they also give a sense of profundity. They tend to be rich in body with relatively low levels of acidity, making them accessible and impressive to unschooled palates, while offering enough stuffing and balance to enthral the experienced.

These qualities have attracted a certain kind of fan. 'The Petite Sirah buyer is, to be frank, rabid,' says Ehren Jordan who, as winemaker for cult producer Turley Wine Cellars, creates some of the biggest, densest, jammiest and most sought-after Petites in the state. 'There's a really intense following for Petite Sirah, and it's grown over the last 10 years,' he adds. Several winemakers echo what Quixote Winery owner Carl Doumani, one of the earliest proponents of Petite in Napa, says: 'Everyone who drinks this wine loves it. They don't just buy one or two bottles as they do with other varieties; they buy it by the case.'

Top: pockets of Petite Sirah are hidden away at the Lytton Springs Vineyard of Ridge. Above: flower buds on the Petite Sirah vine

In an America where bigger is often perceived as better, Petite Sirah is the Humvee without the attitude. This is because it has humble roots; its rags-to-riches-to-rags story illuminates the underdog grape with a Dickensian glow, suggesting a modesty sorely lacking in flashier trends.

Yet Petite Sirah's revival is less difficult to explain than its demise. Until fairly recently the most reliable information anyone had about Petite Sirah was that, with very little effort, it leaves one's teeth with an impermeable purple gloss. Several things suggest themselves as reasons why it has never been taken seriously. For one, its history was that of a blending grape, a support player behind Zinfandel's starring role. Furthermore, until recently, its origin was unknown, so Petite Sirah was considered a bastard and therefore ignoble. Consumers were (and still are) confused by its nominal relationship to Syrah, the diminutive in the name making it sound inferior. Finally, for years winemakers didn't know how to handle its rough-hewn tannins; like old-fashioned Barolo, a wine could take 20 years to become drinkable.

These things are all changing. The tide began to turn in 1996 when, using DNA testing, Dr Carole Meredith of the University of California at Davis discovered that Petite Sirah was indeed related to Syrah. In fact, Petite Sirah is the same grape as the French Durif, a natural crossing between Syrah and the obscure southern French variety Peloursin that occurred in the nursery of Dr Francois Durif, who propagated clones for the French industry. He named the grape after himself and marketed it to growers on the strength of its resistance to downy mildew, a plague for French growers at the time. But French vignerons were never really impressed with the wine Durif made and, furthermore, the small-berried, tightly clustered grape turned out to be acutely vulnerable to rot, which in the humid Rhône (where it was already known colloquially as Petite Sirah) added to its unpopularity. But, as with so many European grapes at the time, it found a new lease of life in America.

Durif was introduced into California in 1884 and was a tenacious survivor. Shortly after its arrival, in the 1890s, California was devastated by phylloxera. But the grape survived, and in the ⇢

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLAY MCLACHLAN

Above: Helen Turley makes some of California's densest Petite Sirahs; the variety ages well, here in Stag's Leap cellars (right). Below: Ridge vineyards, another top exponent

early 20th century Petite Sirah was gradually replanted in the coastal counties of Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino, and in the inland county of Lodi. By 1919, it was the most widely planted grape in Napa.

Because of its heartiness, it survived in largely neglected vineyards during Prohibition and went on to become enormously popular, hitting a post-Prohibition peak of 3,125ha (hectares) planted in 1944. Wines were not known by their variety at that time but Petite Sirah was a primary ingredient in the many red 'Burgundy' wines made in the state. California wine historians love to point out that until 1970, Petite Sirah was the most planted variety in Napa Valley.

The first vintage of a Petite Sirah sold as a varietal wine was 1961, made by Concannon winery of Livermore. Shortly after, other players got into the act, including Souverain of Napa Valley, Foppiano, Stags' Leap Winery, and Ridge, whose first vintage was 1971 from its famous York Creek vineyard in Napa.

As tastes changed, however, Petite Sirah was pulled out to make way for other, trendier vines, particularly Chardonnay and the Bordeaux varieties. Despite its comeback in popularity, Petite Sirah remains – and will continue to remain – a marginal variety in Napa Valley. 'In the 1970s you could get $3 for a bottle of Petite Sirah and $8 for a bottle of Cabernet,' says Doumani. 'You may be able to get $40 for Petite Sirah now, but you can still get $80 for a Cab.' Doumani gets $40 for his Quixote Petite and $30 for its companion – that's right – Panza.

'Everyone who drinks this wine loves it. They don't just buy one or two bottles as they do with so many other varieties; they buy it by the case'

Doumani bought the historic Stags' Leap Winery of Napa Valley in 1970 and, through his championing of the variety, Petite Sirah became a signature wine. When he sold to what is now Beringer Blass in 1997, he kept one of his older vineyards but left Robert Brittan, the effusive, animated winemaker who carries on the tradition of Petite Sirah at Stags' Leap Winery. Brittan believes in blending, which for him is a way to subdue a savage grape.

'The Stags' Leap wines have been and always will be a blended wine,' he says. 'The one problem with Petite Sirah is that it can be a very uncivilised wine. I think that having the other varieties mixed with it, like Syrah and Carignan, can tame it.' Brittan's 1999 Stags' Leap Petite was 79% Petite Sirah, 15% Syrah, and a balance of Viognier, Carignan and Grenache. The result is a complex wine redolent of blackberries and coffee that is soft on the tongue and has a long, warm, chocolatey finish.

Efforts to tame the grape have come through a more nuanced understanding of fermentation and extraction. At the forefront of this wave in the 1970s was Ridge Vineyards' Paul Draper, whose most famous Petite Sirah, York Creek, is a 100% varietal wine. Made from rare 90-year-old vines on Spring Mountain overlooking Napa Valley, these wines are pure-blood examples of Petite. Inky dark, they are charged with blackberry and pepper, but retain some of the tannic rusticity of the Petites of old, as well as a more lithe structure than many other brands (due to slightly lower alcohol). 'We normally pick our Petite Sirahs for the high 13, low 14% alcohol,' says Draper. Like Brittan, Draper works hard to 'civilise' his Petite Sirah. 'We manage our fermentations closely. With Zinfandel, we use a very old method – the submerged cap – to draw more colour. We don't do that with Petite because it's easily over-extracted and you get far more colour than you need. What you really want is enough tannin to stabilise that colour and give you structure without being harsh.

'Now that we've learned to tame the tannins, we can make a wine you can drink upon release,' says Doumani, who attributes better vineyard practices and the employment of sorting tables to the softer wines. Yet, like most of the winemakers I talked to, he doesn't think that a less-tannic Petite will derail one of its least heralded, but most desirable qualities; its ability to age. This facet may be lost on the drink-now consumer, but it's important to the multitudes who pursue Petite Sirah avidly. 'Petite is up there with ···›

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLAY MCLACHLAN

Left to right: Ridge Vineyards' Paul Draper; Petite Sirah grapes, on the vine and being harvested

Cabernet in its ability to age,' says Jordan. 'I recently had a bottle of older Ridge Petite Sirah from 1974 and it was fabulous. I've had 10-year-old bottles that were shockingly youthful. Wines from the 1990 vintage don't even have bottle bouquet.'

Even in a state known for its preference for instant gratification, Jordan thinks this could be a strength. 'Zinfandel has suffered because it doesn't age like Bordeaux varieties. I think Petite Sirah overcomes that hurdle.' Winemaker after winemaker told of miraculously old Petite Sirah that developed Old World, Bordeaux-like complexity after 15 or 20 years in the bottle.

'It may make wines with a reputation for being monolithic,' says Robert Brittan, swirling a glass of his 1987 Stags' Leap, which had complex notes of spice, chocolate, pepper, and soft plummy fruit on the nose. 'But give them time and they'll surprise even the most sceptical taster.'

There's plenty of those. The challenge for Petite Sirah is to define itself as a distinct variety. In California, where Syrah is growing even faster in popularity, the often subtle differences between the noble Rhône grape and its offspring must be articulated. 'My sense is that there's jammier fruit potential in Petite and potential for a little more complexity in the Syrah,' says Draper.

'Syrah is another profile, it's a different wine,' agrees Doumani. 'The tannins are more angular, the acids higher. Petite Sirah tannins are soft when managed well.' To this palate, Petite Sirah rarely develops the gamey, feral notes that so many find seductive about Syrah. Its palate chiefly emphasises fruit. But with soft tannins, deep colour, massive quantities of black fruit, spice and longevity Petite Sirah, it seems, has all the ingredients for a very bright future in California. Or, better yet, a very dark, tooth-staining one. D

Jordan Mackay is wine and spirits editor of San Francisco's metropolitan magazine 7x7, *and a regular contributor to* Food & Wine, The San Francisco Chronicle *and* Wine & Spirits *magazines.*

PETITE SIRAHS TO GET YOUR TEETH INTO

Top Petite Sirah tends to sell out immediately, but can be found on restaurant wine lists and in some specialty shops. Some more commercial wines, however, are affordable, available and make an excellent introduction to the variety.

ROBERT BIALE OLD CRANE RANCH, NAPA 2001 ★★★★
Luscious and smooth, its herb and pepper notes support a brooding, layered nose of chocolate, dark berry fruit, and dry earth. 2–8 years. **£27.25; Lay, Loe ($40)**

ROSENBLUM CELLARS PICKETT ROAD, NAPA 2002 ★★★★
From 80 to 100-year-old vines in northern Napa. Oozing blackberry, boysenberry and freshly cracked black pepper, decadent density in the mouth. Up to 8 years. **£16.25; VCI ($24)**

STEPHEN ROSS THOMANN STATION, NAPA 2001 ★★★★
Impossibly dark colour, huge density and richness but somehow exudes grace. Up to six years. Gorgeous. **N/A UK; +1 805 594 1318 ($32)**

TURLEY WINE CELLARS, TURLEY ESTATE, NAPA 2002 ★★★★
Highly complex nose of black fruit, blueberry, mocha. Tightly coiled today, will open beautifully over time. 2–10 years. **£62.95; Har, Sta, ThH, Unc ($40)**

EDMEADES EAGLE POINT VINEYARD, MENDOCINO 2000 ★★★
Tobacco, meat, and berry fruit lace the nose of this medium to full-bodied effort. Soft and engaging. Up to five years. **N/A UK; +1 707 895-3232 ($18)**

FOPPIANO, PASO ROBLES 2001 ★★★
Spicy and concentrated, with tightly coiled body. Up to six years. **£11.95; WTr ($15)**

MARKHAM, NAPA VALLEY 2000 ★★★
Expressive nose of black plum and boysenberry, graced with touches of vanilla and mocha. Thick in the mouth, the tannins are smooth, but grainy. Up to five years. **£19.99; McK ($29)**

PANZA, STAGS LEAP 2001 ★★★
Vanilla and blackberry nose full of American oak. A dark-chocolate, blackberry/ blueberry density warms the mid-palate and finishes with soft, grainy tannins. 2–5 years. **N/A UK; +1 707 944 2659 ($40)**

RIDGE YORK CREEK, NAPA 2000 ★★★
Complex and tight-fisted, mineral, pepper notes. Needs time. 5–15 years. **N/A UK; +1 408 867 3233 ($27.50)**

STAG'S LEAP, NAPA VALLEY 2001 ★★★
Deep and luscious, chocolate and blackberry. Long, round finish. Needs time to absorb oak. 3–10 years. **£267.64 (case 12); Evy ($31)**

SWITCHBACK RIDGE, PETERSON FAMILY VINEYARD 2001 ★★★
Complex, thick stew of black fruit and spice. Chewy, but sweet tannins enrich the finish. 3–10 years. **N/A UK; +1 612 499 1704 ($45)**

UK stockists on p106 of main issue

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