

Syrah, Petite Sirah, Shiraz: What is the difference?

Modern science comes in handy with wine quite frequently. The bulk of the grapes in California called Petite Sirah since the late 19th century have been identified as Durif, an obscure French grape variety. Durif was created by a Doctor Durif in the 1880s by crossing Peloursin with Syrah. While its resistance to downy mildew was appealing, the variety didn't become popular in France and has all but faded away.

Like many grape varieties from Europe Durif made its way to North America in the late 19th century. Per the University of California, Davis it was imported by Charles McIver in 1884 to California where he and his contemporaries called it Petite Sirah due to the small size of its berries. The strong, tannic wine it produces has long been used to beef up blends, particularly in the wine boom of the 1970s. Many California blends of the time featured Zinfandel and Petite Sirah along with an assortment of other grape varieties. More recently high quality varietal Petite Sirah has come out of California, particularly from Sonoma, in addition to being used in higher quality blends. It is also called Petite Sirah in Australia, Argentina, Brazil and Israel.

Syrah is best known for producing the great wines of the northern Rhône, Hermitage and Côte Rôtie. These long-aging red wines are prized by collectors worldwide. In the southern Rhône it is frequently

blended with other grape varieties including Grenache and Mourvedre. This same grape variety is called Shiraz in Australia where it is the top producer of red wine. Australian Shiraz ranges from basic, inexpensive wine to the famous collectible Penfold's Grange and every price point and quality level in between. For more about Syrah, [click here](#).

Syrah/Shiraz is becoming more common in California (Napa, Sonoma, Central Coast), South Africa, and Chile. All of these regions are proving that this grape variety can produce fine wine where it is warm enough to fully ripen. All of these regions should continue to produce more and more quality Syrah/Shiraz, often at reasonable price points.

The relationship between Syrah and Petite Sirah is parental. To contrast the wines produced by the two grapes the noble Syrah produces wines that are generally big yet elegant. Petite Sirah produces bigger and more tannic wine that isn't always elegant. Think of Syrah as more of a fine dining option, like a filet mignon, while Petite Sirah is more of a hearty option like a burger. Keep in mind wine rules of thumb are only that, a way to get a grip around the diverse wine industry. There are many Petite Sirah wines that are more elegant than a Shiraz with a cartoon animal on the label. Nevertheless make sure to try both, preferably side-by-side to see for yourself.

