



AS SEEN IN
FLORIDA TODAY
MARCH 2, 2006
BY TIM DWIGHT
THE GRAPEVINE



Petite Sirah Deserves More Respect

Nope, this is not a belated Valentine to all of my readers. Instead, “P.S. I Love You” refers to the name of a wine advocacy group formed to promulgate the success of California’s petite sirah grape.

Formed in August 2002 in Sonoma County, this idiosyncratic trade organization was born with one goal in mind, and its mission statement says it succinctly: “To promote, educate and legitimize petite sirah as a noble varietal, with special emphasis on its California terroir uniqueness.”

A singular statement indeed, and it is the word “legitimize” that underscores the particular predicament that growers of the petite sirah grape have faced during the past 40 years or so in California. If there had been a wine grape named after late comedian Rodney Dangerfield, it would be this grape, which has struggled to gain respect - and market share - in the competitive world of California wines.

Numbers, in this case acreage, underlie some of the difficulties facing growers of petite sirah: In 1976, there were 14,000 acres planted in California but by 1995, all but 2,400 had been uprooted and planted with other, more profitable, grape varieties.

Recently, there has been a brief renaissance, and plantings are back up to nearly 6,000 acres as of 2005, centered mostly in Napa, Sonoma and Santa Barbara counties, with wineries in the warmer Central Valley region expanding production as well.

The tide may be turning, and it is no coincidence that this grape finally is gaining a modicum of success. Recent DNA research has established just what - and where - this misunderstood varietal originated, and it’s an interesting story.

Grape’s deep roots

There’s no longer debate that petite sirah traces its origins to France’s Rhone Valley where (it is known though lightly regarded, as “durif.” Not much is known of this fairly rare varietal. But recent research by Dr. Carole Meredith of the Department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of

California has established without a doubt that durif is a cross breed of the syrah grape and an even more obscure grape known as peloursin.

These are not exactly popular grape varieties, even in France. Once transplanted to America, well, I imagine you see the problem current growers face.

For years, many people in the California wine trade mistakenly promoted petite sirah as a substitute for that other Rhone varietal, syrah, and although the two share a few similarities, it is a grape that can stand on its own.

For starters, there’s nothing “petite” about this sirah. It is almost always a grape that produces teeth-staining, muscular wines. Large-scaled and boldly fruited with dark berry and plum fruit flavors, this is a wine that is alternately inky, chewy, voluptuous and generous.

Different producers aim to create distinctly styled wines, but no one has ever accused one of them of being soft - or innocuous. “Medium-to-full-bodied” is as light as they come, and expect “purple teeth syndrome” to set in shortly after your first sip.

But don’t let these words discourage you, because although these are big wines, most are strangely accessible at an early age. In fact, a tour through local markets found many well-priced efforts from the 2004 vintage, one that’s drinking remarkably well for such young wines. Most of the big bruisers I sampled ranged back to the ‘02 vintage, which was also an exceptional one for most wines from the North Coast appellations of California.

What follows are brief tasting notes from selections that should be available in our area; prices noted are approximate retail.

Bogle Vineyards 2004 Petite Sirah, California, (\$10): This winery sources fruit from the warm Central Valley, and Bogle has become the largest producer of petite sirah in California. Black cherry, boysenberry and a sweet edge of plum pudding accentuate this rich wine with just a touch of toasty oak.

Concannon 2003 Petite Sarah, Central Coast (\$13): Concannon’s label proclaims it produced the “first petite sirah in California” more than 40 years ago. This one is a full-bodied effort with bright floral notes on the nose and flavors of blueberry and blackberry jam on the smooth, silky finish.

Foppiano 2002 Estate Petite Sirah, Russian River Valley (\$18): Another pioneering effort from the winery whose efforts led to the foundation of “P.S. I Love You.” Its 2002 is a large-scaled, very dry wine that is both robust and tannic. Sweet plum and blackberry flavors enticingly hint of better things to come with a bit of bottle age.

Stag’s Leap 2002 Petite Syrah, Napa Valley, (\$34): One of the benchmarks for this grape varietal, Stag’s Leap can lay claim to the initial notoriety for this wine, dating back to the late ‘60s, when the winery was founded by quixotic vintner Carl Doumani. This big, brooding effort needs some time, and decanting, to coax out its complex flavors of blackberry and black pepper.

Epiphany 2002 Rodney’s Vineyard” Petite Sirah, Santa Barbara County (\$25): I’ve saved the best for last and, in truth, have held this column until this wine had its commercial debut in Florida last week. I’d tasted this spectacular effort when winemaker Eli Parker (from Fess Parker estate) toured - and tempted us with this wine back in November 2005. The wine has finally been released, and it is even better than I remember, with smoky blackberry ripe plum and black licorice accents. Sweet tannins support the large-scale 15.9 percent alcohol, but the substantial fruit rings through to the finish. An early candidate for wine of the year in 2006?

www.psiloveyou.org