



RESURGENCE OF PETITE SIRAH HAS MADE FOR NOTABLE WINES

BY RICH MAURO

Four years ago, I wrote my first review of wines labeled petite sirah. In interviews with several producers, I found a passion and enthusiasm I had previously only seen among zinfandel producers.

Curiously, after a 100-year history in California, the grape was almost abandoned during the 1980s and early 1990s. But, thanks to a handful of dedicated growers and winemakers, it has enjoyed an amazing resurgence since 1995.

Now 345 wineries throughout California are making varietal petite sirah wines. They even have their own advocacy organization, PS I Love You (www.psiloveyou.org), which has 67 members.

Despite its name and origins — a crossing of syrah and peloursin grapes — petite sirah is not a lesser version of syrah. It is a distinct variety that happens to have syrah as one of its parents. Thus, it can display a similar flavor profile — such as smoke, meat, leather, earth, berries, mineral and pepper — with an ability to age well.

But there are differences: It often produces bigger, denser, more rustic wines (thus belying its “petite” moniker).

Petite sirah is the perfect wine for full-flavored foods, including fatty meats, game, strong cheeses, mushroom dishes and stews. It also is a fine companion for barbecue and grilled foods.

One serving note, though: These wines are so full flavored and tannic, I suggest opening the bottle an hour before pouring or even waiting a year before drinking.

In a recent tasting, I sampled 22 wines from 16 producers. As a group, they delivered a lot of wine for the money. My recommendations follow.

The 2003 Stags' Leap Napa Valley (labeled Petite Syrah, \$38) was my favorite of the tasting. It is a complete package, tons of up front fruit and subtle complexities, highly structured yet lusciously textured.

The wine clearly benefits from its major source, a 70-year-old estate vineyard, and from the addition of other Rhone varietals in the blend.

Three other wines were not far behind. All are big, full-flavored wines with plenty of tannin.

- 2004 Marr Shannon Ranch (\$25), from Marr Cellars, a small winery just northwest of Sacramento. The grapes are from a high-altitude vineyard in Lake County.

- 2004 Mettler Lodi (\$25) from the Mettler family, which has farmed grapes in Lodi in California's Central Valley since 1899 but began bottling some of their production under their own label in 1999.

- 2005 Mounts Estate Bottled (\$28), from the Mounts family, who have been growing premium wine grapes for more than 50 years in the Dry Creek Valley.

...notable values...

- Concannon, which dates to 1883 and released the first varietally labeled petite sirah in 1964, produced a full flavored and large scaled 2004 Central Coast “Limited Release” (\$14).

- Parducci, the oldest winery in Mendocino (1921), produced a juicy 2004 Mendocino County (\$14) with admirable intensity.

The following wines also merited recommendation.

- 2005 Bogle Lodi (\$11)

- 2005 Guenoc Lake County (\$20)

- 2004 EOS Reserve Paso Robles Estate Bottled (\$25)

- 2004 Vina Robles Paso Robles “Jardine” (\$26)

- 2004 Earthquake (by Michael & David Phillips) Lodi (\$28)

- 2004 Silkwood San Joaquin County (\$39)

I think producers and consumers alike are seeking alternatives to high-profile varietals such as cabernet sauvignon and merlot, both for better value and for different flavor profiles. Petite sirah is a good place to start.

Note that the Mounts wine is not available in Colorado, so contact the winery at 1-707-292-8148 or mountswinery.com.

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