

As Seen On...

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PETITE SIRAH POWERHOUSE AMONG REDS

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It is the fate of petite sirah, for better or for worse, that it is blessed with the potential to produce the biggest, toughest, brawniest red wines made in California.

Its creator, a French vineyardist named Durif, had no such intentions of course. He was simply looking for a way to craft a new grape based on syrah that would not have syrah's tendency toward powdery mildew when it gets wet in the vineyard. Durif was working a century and a half ago at a time when vineyard practices were primitive by today's standards and when all grape varieties had difficulty getting ripe.

In his pursuit of something better, Durif crossed syrah with a lesser known variety, peloursin, and came up with what we, on this side of the Atlantic, call petite sirah. He, on the other hand, in a congratulatory flash of self-expression, named his new creation, "durif."

Turns out that Durif's durif never really caught on in France because its tight bunches tended to rot when they got wet. But somehow the grape made its way to our world where it mistakenly became identified as the true syrah. Because we have so little moisture during the growing season, the grape's rotting problems were not the instant disqualifiers here that they were in France.

There was always a suspicion that petite sirah was not syrah. As early as the 1940s, the Louis Martini Winery was bottling it as Durif.

But in the absence of the true syrah, the petite sirah moniker took over and, together with the unmistakably bold wines it produced, a legend of sorts was born.

In the early 1970s, when California vineyardists started to enjoy wide-scale success and saw many of their wines take on the style and aging characteristics of European wines, petite sirah came into prominence. There were those who, based solely on the aggressive tannins in the wine, claimed that our "syrah" would live even longer in the bottle than those grown in France.

It turns out that they were right and wrong. Some of the petite sirah tannic monsters of that era have shown an ability to age forever. But those old wines, and I have a batch in my cellar, do not begin to grow into the beauty and complex power that the real syrah can demonstrate. As this recognition grew, along with the notion that we were not growing the real syrah, petite sirah's popularity plummeted.

Over the last 30 years, while California's grape acreage has more than doubled, petite sirah plantings have dropped by more than half. What remains often goes into blends to give them more structure. But a small and incredibly convinced group of followers has elevated petite sirah to cult status.

By comparison to the leading red varieties, petite sirah is just a blip on the radar, but to the true believers, the search for petite sirah greatness is like the search for the Holy Grail.

Petite sirah prices remain high and new plantings are beginning to crop up in warm, hillside vineyards thus ensuring its fans of plenty of wine in the future. There is also a parallel trend with petite sirah that may enhance its staying power in our vineyards.

Whether it is the coming to prominence of the true syrah, with its mix of power and balanced fruit, or the greater recognition that grapes like petite sirah are often better when blended with softer, rounder flavors and textures, there is now batch of petite sirahs that have adopted a more moderate approach. While there is nothing wrong with power for power's sake if a huge flock of wine buyers agree, to my taste, the emergence of a more accessible approach to the grape is a good thing.

PS I Love You Member Reviews:

2003 Parducci, True Grit, Mendocino, \$24

For almost a century, this rustic winery stayed in the hands of the Parducci family and enjoyed great success as a producer of accessible, reasonably priced wines. It seemed to lose favor when it was finally sold, but now, under new leadership headed up by Paul Dolan, former head of operations at Fetzer, there are welcome signs of a turnaround. **"True Grit" wins me over with its deep and impressively concentrated aromas of blackberries, pepper, dark earth and spice and its extracted, insistently fruity flavors.** The wine is at once both powerful and keenly composed, and it exhibits a lengthy finish with nicely measured tannins. It can be enjoyed now with hearty meat dishes, but its sense of proportion bodes well for a half-dozen years of age.

2004 Trentadue, North Coast, \$18

Such is the popularity of petite sirah that one does not find many wines priced under \$20 unless they are high-production efforts from very warm, inland locations. So, **full credit to Trentadue for this wine and the slightly softer touch featured in this rounded, oak-sweetened, mildly jammy offering.** Always ripe and reasonably fruited, it is closed off a bit at the back by typical petite sirah tannins but will still make a welcome mate for a flavorful beef roasts or spicy lamb kebabs.