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THE NO ACCOUNT GRAPE: PETITE SIRAH

BY DAN BERGER

I'm not entirely sure why I like petite sirah so much, but my fascination with this otherwise no-account grape variety from southern France seems to know no bounds.

Sure, it's usually a hulking brute of a wine, but that usually means it's not going to lack the oomph called for when the dinner fare is a char-grilled steak.

Most petite sirahs don't have to alibi for their weight. The variety is just so rustic, earthy, coarse and, well, deeply interesting.

Not all of them, I guess. Those made with 16 percent alcohol or close to it are more like port; those I eschew. And one reason some petite sirah makers are styling their wines in this manner is that some wine critics love them.

Other wine critics prefer the style of petite sirah that's merely opaque and thick with jammy fruit, but that has better balance. And there are more and more of that style being made. The reason: The number of producers has exploded.

In 2000, it was estimated that there were just 60 wineries making a petite sirah in California. Today there are a confirmed 370 producers doing so, by far the greatest number in California history. Moreover, the variety even has its own cheerleader society — P.S. I Love You — which will stage its sixth annual petite sirah Noble Symposium at Foppiano Vineyards in Sonoma County on Aug. 7. (It's not really open to the public, but if you wish to attend, the fee is \$175 per person.)

Jo Diaz, spokeswoman for the group, said the discussion will be mighty technical, and only wine geeks may wish to attend. (For details, call Diaz at 707-620-0788.)

Another more public-oriented event is scheduled for Nov. 9 at Markham Vineyards in the Napa Valley. The Masters of petite sirah is scheduled to offer a look at how petite sirah ages.

Various producers, including Bogle, Concannon, Foppiano, Markham, Parducci, Pedroncelli, Robert Biale, Rosenblum, Silkwood and Trentadue will pour petite sirahs that are at least 10 years old.

Tickets for the tasting and sit-down dinner are \$120 per person. For details see the website: www.psiloveyou.com.

Then, next Feb. 16, there is Dark & Delicious, an event in which 20 petite sirah makers are paired with 20 food vendors at Concannon Vineyards in Livermore Valley. Tickets for that event are \$45 per person.

All this attention to a once-disrespected grape is fascinating. The variety didn't make its appearance on a wine label until Concannon made it as a varietal in 1964. Then it was a slow ascendancy, with Foppiano and Parducci making early versions.

Fifty years ago, petite sirah was the most heavily planted grape in the Napa Valley. As cabernet sauvignon gained fame, many old petite sirah vineyards were torn out.

But in the last decade, a number of acres in Napa Valley have been planted with more petite sirah, as consumers are discovering it for its intensity and ability to age.

One drawback to this powerful red wine is that it can be mighty astringent when young. The high tannins in the wine do, however, help it age nicely. I have a few 35-year-old bottlings in my cellar that are still in great shape.

If you want to drink a petite sirah when it's young, decant it for at least an hour — and always serve with hearty foods.

Wine of the Week: 2004 Foppiano Petite Sirah, Russian River Valley (\$25) — Chunky aromas of plum and spice, with traces of violets and blackberry jam. Big, brawny entry, but not as astringent as most. Still, best to serve it with char-grilled beef, or after dinner with hearty cheeses.

Dan Berger resides in Sonoma County. Berger publishes a weekly newsletter on wine and can be reached at danberger@VintageExperiences.com.