



An Orphan in Europe Gets the Royal Treatment in California

By Rod Smith

America's a melting pot for grapes as well as people. Even an obscure French variety like Petite Sirah has a chance to make it here. Dismissed as a no-account grape in its homeland, it now produces fine California reds that routinely cost upward of \$30 a bottle.

All of California's wine grape varieties came from the Old World. Some, like Cabernet and Chardonnay, have luminous pedigrees and letters of introduction. Predictably, they've done very well for themselves. But even those that come from the other side of the tracks back in Europe have a shot at fame and fortune in the New World.

Zinfandel is the classic example. It was virtually extinct in its native Croatia by the time it showed up here in the late Nineteenth Century. It went on to become California's revered Heritage grape.

Petite Sirah followed a similar course to become a kind of backup Heritage grape. Some of California's oldest vines are Petite Sirah. Many stand alongside equally venerable Zinfandel, Carignane, Alicante Bouchet and Grenache vines. That's the classic California "field blend"—grape varieties that are grown together, picked together, and fermented together to make the kind of hearty red preferred by the Italian immigrants who began planting vines throughout the state in the late Nineteenth Century.

Those old vineyards have stood the test of turbulent times. They've survived Prohibition, two phylloxera infestations, economic slumps, and the pre-emptive spread of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay during the 1990s.

They've survived because they yield delicious and distinctive wines. As Ridge Vineyards winemaker Paul Draper points out, "The old vines that have survived through Prohibition and the Depression have done so because they're growing on excellent sites, and produce particularly interesting wine. That's why they have the reputation—not because they're old, but because they were planted in the right place."

Petite Sirah is a cross between Syrah, one of the world's great wine grapes, and Peloursin, an obscure Mediterranean variety. In southern France it's known as Durif, after the grape breeder who developed it at the University of Montpellier. In the northern Rhone it's called Serine—or, occasionally, Petite Syrah because of its smaller grapes and clusters.

There are other names for it, too, but by any moniker it's known more for a natural resistance to mold (which makes it reliable in humid locations) than for the quality of its wine, which tends to be coarse and tannic. In some places it's a mainstay of rustic blends produced by co-ops, but is virtually never a featured varietal.

But while Petite Sirah has never quite found a niche in Europe, it's steadily developed a rather passionate following in California. Its presence is modest—barely 4,000 acres, mostly in Mendocino, Sonoma, and Napa counties—but that's a little misleading. Widely planted grapes like Cabernet, Merlot, and Chardonnay are commodities, grown simply for profit regardless of their suitability for a given site. Growers who have Petite Sirah really want Petite Sirah, and wineries that produce it do so with conviction.

Its strength is versatility, a capacity to be a workhorse or a star as the situation demands. A hundred years ago Petite Sirah was widely used in California to bring color, tannin, and structure to red blends, in the same way that French producers, especially in Burgundy, used Syrah to beef up their lighter cuvees.

Zinfandel producers, in particular, still see Petite Sirah as an indispensable blending component. As Zin's supporting actor it adds depth and structure, along with darker, richer aromas and flavors that complement Zin's distinctively bright, high-toned fruit. Sometimes the Syrah half of its lineage contributes a Rhone-like cracked peppercorn note.

That shows the Syrah side of the family. It's particularly evident in the excellent Ridge Petite Sirahs. Ridge has been producing for more than three decades, and they include some of the most impressive California wines I've ever tasted...

Stags' Leap Winery is another standard bearer. Its estate vineyard in southeast Napa Valley was established in the 1880s as a field blend, but several generations of owners narrowed the selection down to Petite Syrah (the original owners' spelling, retained by present owner Beringer-Blass Wine Estates).

While moving house recently I unearthed a forgotten bottle of 1978 Stags' Leap Petite Syrah, which I subsequently opened for a dinner thanking my volunteer furniture crew. It was a stunning wine, from the heights of its beguiling cedar incense and black molasses perfume to the depths of its sumptuous, inky fruit still fresh and lively after all those years.

Stags' Leap currently produces two bottlings. Both '99s are worth seeking out. The estate bottling offers the rustic pleasures of dark, juicy fruit flavors and pleasantly raspy tannin. The more serious Ne Cede Malis Reserve is riper, richer, and more massive, a wine to age a few years and then open by the fireplace after dinner some rainy night.

Concannon (in Livermore) and Foppiano (Russian River Valley) have both been Petite Sirah champions throughout most of the 20th century. The '99 Foppiano in particular is a good example of the kinder, gentler style of fruit-forward Petite that has swelled the varietal's fan base in recent years.

...Another striking '99 Napa Valley Petite comes from David Fulton. Its combination of minerality and piercing floral perfume evoke a rose garden planted in gravel. Yet another is the earthy, spiced-cherry '99 Carver-Sutro Palisades Vineyard, from old dry-farmed vines in the northern Napa Valley.

The next time you find yourself driving through northern California's wine country, keep an eye out for old vines. They're easy to spot, typically standing in ranks like an army of green-haired gnomes preparing to charge down the hillside armed with clusters of small purple grapes. Most of the ones you see will be Zinfandel, but more than you think are Petite Sirah.