

PETITE IN NAME, BIG IN SATISFACTION

WINEMAKERS CONTINUE TO MAKE PETITE SIRAH BECAUSE THEY ENJOY THE WINE, NOT JUST TO MAKE A BUCK

By Dorothy Gaiter and John Brecher

Early this year, we conducted a blind tasting of inexpensive Zinfandel and once again were disappointed with the current state of one of the loves of our youth. There was an interesting postscript, though. Of our six favourites, five of them were blended with some Petite Sirah to add colour and tannic backbone. One of them was fully 15% Petite Sirah. It seems a shame that once-proud Zinfandel now needs Petite Sirah to give it life, but this much was clear: It was time to taste some Petite Sirah.

Petite Sirah has been one of our favourite little joys for a long time. For years, it was the foundation of many American wines called "Burgundy", but now it has struck out on its own. Despite its identity problems — it is different from Syrah, though some wineries call it Petite Syrah, and it is the same as a grape called Durif, though some vines long considered Petite Sirah are actually something else — its popularity does seem to be growing. The amount of acreage devoted to the grape in California has almost doubled since 2000, though it remains small compared with the big boys.

Did we say big? That's what this wine is all about. It's a dark, peppery wine with blackberries, blueberries, plums, some herbs and, at best, a hint of minerals. We've always liked it for its distinctiveness. It truly tastes like no other wine in the world. Or at least it has in the past. Our experience with some wines, unfortunately, has been that increased popularity often equals decreased quality. How about Petite Sirah? We bought a large sampling from shelves to find out.

There are far more Petites out there than you might think. The problem is that most are made in fairly small quantities and few wine stores have enough to offer a Petite Sirah aisle, so they're often bunched together with Syrah or in the "Red-Other" area. We tasted the wines in blind flights over several nights.

Good news: It's clear that winemakers continue to make Petite Sirah because they enjoy the wine, not just to make a buck. The result: wines of personality and some excitement, wines that we love to drink and talk about. That doesn't mean we liked all of them. We think some were left a bit sweet, which is a mistake, and we found some too herbal

and a few too creamy. But in just about every case, we felt that this was the wine that the vintner wanted to make. To us, one of the keys to truly loving wine is appreciating the vision behind a wine even if you don't much like the taste, and we appreciated the vast majority of these wines.

What we discussed, time and again, was the crispness of the wines. We don't generally associate crispness with big, red wines, but the fine acidity and tannins of Petite Sirah give these wines a little crackle. The best ones are polished wines, and we mean that almost literally. They seem to have a sheen about them, like bright sun on a shiny wooden dresser. That makes their big, bold, somewhat grapey tastes complex, interesting and unexpected. It means that, in the good ones, the wine never gets boring. We sensed many different smells and tastes in these wines, from black cherries to chocolate, from herbal tea to smoked bacon (although, as it turned out, none of our favourites were heavy on the bacon).

...Our best value was Concannon, which has been one of our go-to Petites for many years. We felt we were tasting ultra-ripe grapes that were bursting in our mouths, which gave us some serious joy. Adam Richardson, the winemaker, told us: "Petite Sirah is a big, full-bodied wine, which is what you want, but you want it to be soft and approachable as well. If you get both, you're doing well." When we told him that, when we tasted it, we wrote in our notes that it was like the whole berry was in there, he said: "We try to interfere with those grapes as little as possible. If it tastes like the whole grape is in there, that's because it is. We really respect the grapes."

By the way, one of our long-time favourites, Bogle, was not among our best this time, but it was still quite drinkable and certainly worth trying.

Petite Sirah is a great cold-weather wine and pairs well with hearty foods...Richardson of Concannon suggests game or duck breast, "something that's been grilled or roasted rather than stewed — not a heavy version of the food. As far as vegetables, the richer, darker green vegetables like spinach. Spanakopita goes really well." We swooned at just the thought of that spinach-and-feta-cheese pie with these wines. Yum. And one more idea for you risk-takers: Try it with a bite of chocolate.

