

Nothing petite about taste of these wines

The biggest hype coming out of California these days — other than the Schwarzenegger election, of course — is over wines made from “Rhone varietals,” a group of grapes associated with France’s Rhone Valley.

The syrah is the grape receiving most of the attention from California winemakers, but a related grape, petite sirah, is beginning to make waves, too.

Although not officially a Rhone grape (it isn’t one of the grape varieties approved by the French government), its roots can be traced back to the region. DNA testing has proven that the majority of California petite sirah is actually durif, a grape that was propagated by a Dr. Durif in the 1880s by crossing syrah and the obscure variety peloursin.

Although the grape never caught on in France, it was brought to California in the 1890s and became valued as a blending grape to give wines structure, body and color. In fact, most of the generically labeled red wines produced during the following century contained large amounts of petite sirah (think Gallo Hearty Burgundy).

In the early 1960s, Concannon and Foppiano became the first modern wineries to bottle petite sirah as a varietal wine, and they’ve built their reputation on the grape. But, until recently, varietal wines made from the grape were at best an afterthought for most wine-



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makers.

Over the last decade, though, there has been renewed interest in petite sirah. Winemakers note that many petite sirah vineyards are characterized by old vines and low yields, prime conditions for producing distinctive wine.

As vintners have come to realize the quality possible from the grape, plantings have increased. California vintners crushed 9,655 tons in 1990 and 14,908 in 2001. Wineries throughout the state are now making petite sirah wines that deliver good quality for the money.

Despite its name and origins, petite sirah is not a lesser version of syrah. In California, at least, its wines can have a flavor profile similar to syrah, and I’ll bet most people would have difficulty distinguishing well-made wines from the two grapes.

Ironically, petite sirah makes a wine that is not at all petite. Although it can display many of the same characteristics of the Rhone-style reds — such as meat, leather, earth, berry, mineral and pepper — it often produces bigger, denser wines.

Jim Concannon says that

the wines generally age quite well, with most good for 10-plus years.

Not surprisingly, Lou Foppiano and other winemakers recommend pairing petite sirah with full-flavored foods, including red meats, game, strong cheeses, mushroom dishes, stews and the like.

If you are seeking alternatives to brand-name varietals like cabernet sauvignon and merlot, both for more reasonable prices and for different flavor profiles, the following wines might be just what you’re looking for.

I’ve broken them down by winery location, since good petite sirah is made throughout California.

Mendocino

- 2000 Lolonis Redwood Valley Orpheus Heritage Vineyards (\$35)

- 2000 Parducci California (\$13)

- 1998 Parducci Reserve Mendocino (\$14)

- 1998 Hidden Cellars Mendocino (\$13)

- 1998 Hidden Cellars Mendocino Heritage Eaglepoint Ranch (\$22)

Lake County

- 2000 Guenoc North Coast (\$19)

- 1999 Guenoc Serpentine Meadow Reserve Guenoc Valley (\$36)

Napa Valley

- 1999 Silkwood Howell Mountain (\$39)

Sonoma

- 2000 Pedroncelli Dry Creek Valley Family Vineyards

(\$14)

- 1999 Fieldstone Alexander Valley Staten Family Reserve (\$30)

- 2000 Fieldstone Alexander Valley Staten Family Reserve (\$30)

- 2001 Fieldstone Alexander Valley Staten Family Reserve Vintage Port (\$50)

- 2001 Foppiano Paso Robles (\$15)

- 2001 Foppiano Russian River Valley Bacigalupi Vineyard (\$18)

- 2000 Foppiano Estate Millennium Selection Res Sirah Russian River V (\$48)

Livermore

- 2000 Concannon Central Coast Select Vineyards (\$12)

- 2001 Concannon Central Coast Select Vineyards (\$12)

- 2000 Concannon Livermore Valley Limited Release (\$24)

Paso Robles

- 1999 EOS Reserve (\$22)

- 2000 EOS Reserve (\$25)

Temecula

- 1999 Cilurzo Estate Bottled Reserve (\$20)

- 2001 Cilurzo Late Harvest Reserve (\$12, 375ml)

Cilurzo (www.cilurzowine.com or 1-800-783-5250) and Silkwood (1-800-550-9463) are not available in Colorado, so contact the wineries directly for availability.

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Petite **S**irah
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