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CALIFORNIA'S NO.1 WINE, SPIRITS & BEER MAGAZINE FOR PROFESSIONALS

PATTERSON'S

BEVERAGE Journal

FEBRUARY 2004

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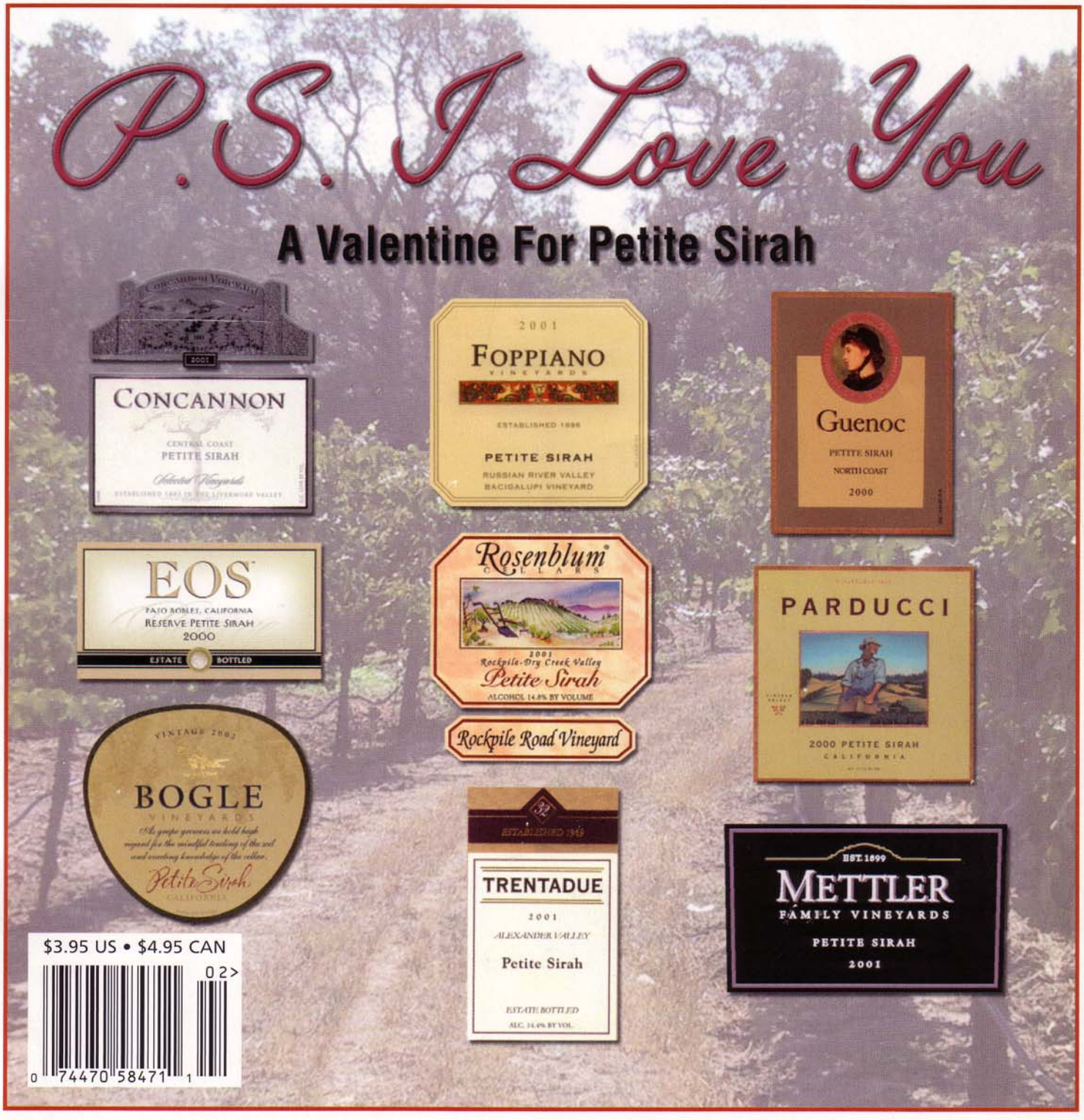

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P.S. I Love You

A Valentine For Petite Sirah

By Meridith May Brandel, Senior Editor

When Dr. Carole Meredith, a prominent plant geneticist from the Department of Viticulture and Enology, University of California at Davis established Petite Sirah's true identity in 1996, the mystery and debate over the pedigree of the varietal was solved.

"Peloursin is the mother and Syrah is the father," explains Meredith, "which means that Petite Sirah is the legitimate offspring of (France's) Syrah."

The grape was introduced to California in 1878, but it was not until 1964 that the first Petite Sirah was released as a varietal on its own, by Concannon Vineyards of Livermore.

Since then, as many as 60 California wineries produce "Pets" as they are lovingly referred to by wine professionals, and the consumer following is growing in respect and indicated by sales successes.

In August 2002, a Petite Sirah symposium was sponsored and held at Foppiano Vineyards in Healdsburg where major industry growers, producers, winemakers and educators such as Dr. Carole Meredith, talked about numerous aspects of the varietal in detail.

The seminar proved so valuable, the attendees were of a single mind: form a Petite Sirah group whose sole function and focus would be to support a marketing/public relations effort for this mutually admired grape. Lou Foppiano discussed with co-organizers Christine Wells and Jo Diaz that he would be the first to support the effort, becoming the first charter member.

The group has since grown to 40 members and now P.S. I Love You is more than just a love letter to Petite Sirah, it is a "recipe for success" that has lead to the Blue Tooth Tour, a series of National seminars and tastings that will help to educate the trade and the media about the grape's history and its undeniable appeal as one of California's grape varieties experiencing a major Renaissance.

The wine is recognized by its dense blackberry fruit and gamey character. But no one will disagree with its color: inky black. Hence, the Blue Tooth Tour, where no one will leave unstained.

True Blue

Close-Up Encounters With Petite Sirah Pioneers

Concannon Vineyards

40TH ANNIVERSARY OF PETITE SIRAH PRODUCTION

The original label brings back many fond memories for vinter Jim Concannon.

Jim Concannon recalls the winery's first vintage of Petite Sirah, the first 100 percent Petite Sirah to be bottled without blending. "There was a fine retailer named Denny Caldwell, who was a friend of my brother Joe. He owned a store in Pasadena called Heinz Grocery. He was, at the time, one of the only retailers selling premium wines. A judge at the California State Fair, he was quite knowledgeable on the subject and came up with a bright idea. He advised us to bottle our Petite Sirah – which was then blended into our generic 'Burgundy' – as a varietal on its own. That was a huge thought in those days."

In 1964, one thousand of Concannon's non-vintage Petite Sirah was released and shipped to the Pasadena market where it was sold in a matter of months.

"Forty years later, here we are sponsoring the Blue Tooth Tour with other wineries to celebrate the varietal like never before."

Appropriately coinciding with Valentine's Day, Concannon and cohort's tribute will be manifested by meeting and greeting the trade, the media and interested consumers to promote the attributes of the hailed Petite Sirah on the tour.

"Petite Sirah pleases the palate so much," Concannon is passionate to point out. "We also find that it has an overwhelming following of women."

It was suggested that perhaps that phenomenon occurs because of the wine's distinct chocolate notes that seem to permeate like a welcomed guest within its deep berry heart.

Concannon's Petite Sirah is noteworthy, not only because it has historically been associated with the winery, but because of its complexity and structure that motivates the palate to desire it with fervor. Concannon points to the soil in the Livermore Valley, specifically among the winery's own 200 acres that resemble the Rhone Valley.

"Our Petite Sirah is so much in demand, we cannot keep up with production. I blame it on the terroir here. At least 70 percent of our soil is similar to the Rhone, the gravelly soil is at least 400 feet deep. We're still pulling out big boulders out of the vineyard to this day: I remember my grandfather asking my brother and I to set to the task when we were children."

When Syrah and Shiraz is pouring into the country from international growing regions and domestic Syrah production continues at its own frantic pace, Concannon remarks on the 2004 Blue Tooth Tour as a Historic movement for the grape.

"I look at this as a Crusade," he opines. "The growers are making a huge commitment. It's like we're all falling in love again after 40 years."

The Blue Tooth Tour

THE PETITE SIRAH ADVOCACY GROUP TAKES A BITE OUT OF THIS GRAPE'S MYSTERY WITH A ROAD SHOW ALL ITS OWN

Blue Tooth Tour

P.S. I Love You is Petite Sirah's recipe for success. The Mantra for the advocacy group is to promote, educate and legitimize Petite Sirah as a noble varietal with a special emphasis on its California terroir uniqueness.

Organizer Jo Diaz of Diaz Communications points out, "Petite Sirah is a survivor. When it was brought to the U.S. it survived Phylloxera, World War I, Prohibition and World War II. In the 1960s, it was the primary grape grown in the Napa Valley."

And now, in 2004, we salute this rich, powerful varietal, by showcasing its finest producers to the trade.

Southwestern Tour

Friday, February 13 – San Francisco (Firehouse Room/Fort Mason Center), 4-7pm

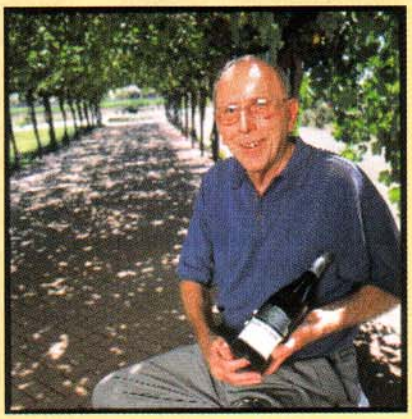
Monday, February 16 – Los Angeles (Bliss Restaurant & Lounge),4-7pm

Wed, February 18 – Phoenix (Phoenix Zoo),4-7pm

Friday, Feb 20 – Santa Fe (St. Francis Hotel),4-7pm

Monday, February 23 – Dallas (Gypsy Tea Room),4-7pm

Tuesday, February 24 - Houston (Rouge Houston),4-7pm



Jim Concannon, one of the founding fathers of Petite Sirah in modern-day California winemaking

Trentadue Winery

Miro Tcholakov, winemaker at Trentadue

Miro Tcholakov studied viticulture in his native homeland of Bulgaria. Graduating with a degree in enology and viticulture in 1990, he was one of 400 students allowed to participate in an exchange program through the Future Farmers of America.

Spending his first month in Napa, Tcholakov began working at Dry Creek Winery for the Healdsburg winery's 1990 vintage.

Nine years later, Tcholakov left his position as Assistant Winemaker at Dry Creek to work for Trentadue, just before the boutique winery's 1999 harvest. "My first harvest won a Sweepstakes award for "red wine" in the West Coast Wine Competition. The lauded wine was the Zinfandel/Petite Sirah blend called "La Storia."

Following that industry acknowledgement, Trentadue began receiving what Tcholakov refers to as "an avalanche of gold medals" along with recognition by some of the top wine critics in the country.

"Trentadue always possessed great fruit," Tcholakov claims, but the winery was always in the shadow before we really stepped up to showcase our Petite Sirah." The winery has been noted for selling its fruit to some of the most renowned California producers.

"I applied a lot of heart, soul and hard work when I joined the winery," he adds. "I asked Victor Trentadue what he wanted me to change. His answer was true to my own philosophy: to make a splash with big, bold extracted reds. Wines that are definitely not for the everyday consumer. There are plenty of wineries out there for that purpose."

Trentadue's small production of Petite Sirah has caused its 2001 vintage to be sold out, but barrel samples of the Alexander Valley estate 2002 vintage will be poured during the Blue Tooth Tour.

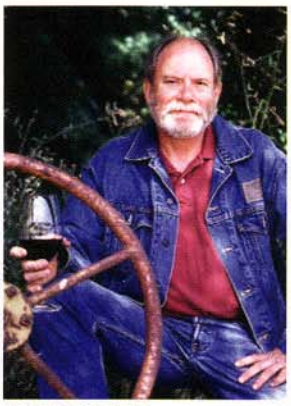
"Everyone has been talking about the winemaker's hands-on approach and analysis, but I see a total swing in the opposite direction. I come from the Old World, and that's where the expression 'it's all in the vineyards' continues to be the method of operation. Sure, I know the science, but you only use it when it's needed."

Petite Sirah has become Tcholakov's favorite wine. "We don't have Petite Sirah in Europe: it's been too sensitive to moisture, rot and mold. It just grows beautifully in the right California vineyards, such as here in the Alexander Valley. My relationship with this grape is rewarding. It is a most generous wine – in color, aroma and flavor. I am proud to be a part of its revival."

Tcholakov and Victor Trentadue are so enamored by the varietal, they've decided to bottle their own separate label from grapes grown at Trentadue's home in Dry Creek. "We're calling the wine 'Miro,'" says Trentadue, who grew up in a life of farming and vineyards. "Perhaps Petite Sirah is more of a cult wine now, but as it sees more plantings in the right places, we will see its elegance evolve even further."

Tcholakov inserts the idea that "Petite Sirah is back – but it never really went away in the first place. That's what we are discovering."

Foppiano Vineyards


Louis Foppiano

"Anyone can make wine," says Louis Foppiano, "but it takes marketing know-how to sell it."

One of the winery's greatest moments was the decision to specialize in Petite Sirah. "Here in Sonoma, we could grow Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay and be a small fish in a big pond," stated Foppiano, "but our sights were larger than that. What would it take for us to be a big fish in a small pond? The answer was Petite Sirah."

The winery's first Petite Sirah vintage was in 1964, but according to Foppiano, it didn't take off until the 1980s. "We haven't changes its style since. Our philosophy is to keep it as approachable as possible."

Winemaker Bill Regan has been overseeing production since 1981, and he continues to focus on this varietal for huge structure, concentration of flavor and a flavor profile that is a ripe package of berries, chocolate and spice.

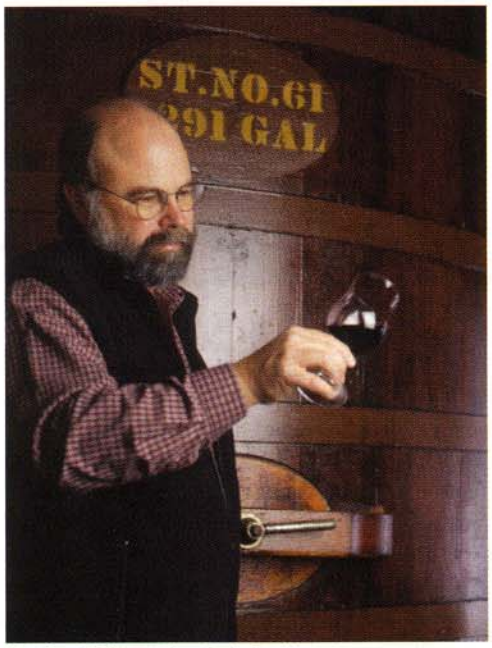
Foppiano's latest vintage, 2001 Russian River Valley Estate Petite Sirah, will be poured on the Blue Tooth Tour. "Everyone was taken by surprise about the power of this wine," notes Foppiano, who says there is plenty of room for aging from this vintage. Case production reached the 9,000 mark and plans to broaden the varietal's distribution are planned through contracts with growers along with special vineyard designate plantings.

One of the founding wineries for P.S. I Love You, Foppiano Vineyards has been host to two educational seminars on the subject of Petite Sirah.

"The wine had been underrated for too long," insists Foppiano , who claimed that once the winery started paying proper attention to the varietal, sales boomed. "We're thrilled to take our message on the road."

Parducci Wine Estates

In the heart of Mendocino County is the home of Parducci Wine Estates, one of California's largest Petite producers. Ukiah, the home of the winery, is located along the headwaters of the Russian River, 28 miles from the Pacific Ocean. Cool nights and warm days grow superior wine grapes on the shallow soils and gentle slopes of the Home Ranch.



Parducci Winemaker Bob Swain

Winemaker Bob Swain comes from a background that encompasses sake brewing in Berkeley to the Bordeaux varietal house, Clos Du Val and working with Petite in the '70s at E&J Gallo. Swain moved to Parducci in 1997, where he saw a chance to use his experience in coordinating multi-layers of responsibility in lending his winemaking talent and expertise.

"Parducci has been making Petite Sirah for a long time," explains Swain, "it was what they were known for." He points out that while the varietal associated with this winery was never too overpowering or tannic, the grape continues to be misrepresented as having that unapproachable reputation.

"There is room for 'monster' wines out there, but overall, and in the style of other Rhone wines, Petite Sirah today is not the same as the blending grape it was years before."

Swain enjoys making Petite Sirah and his latest vintage, 2000, sourced from Lodi and Mendocino, has been receiving rave reviews from the press. "The flavors are bright and the berry character shines through with medium tannins. It is approachable, not aggressive. Our customers love it for its jammy berry fruit and black pepper spiciness, and because it's a great value (Parducci Petite Sirah typically retails for $10)."

Believing that the Petite Sirah market is ever-changing, Swain is delighted to be a part of the Blue Tooth Tour. His 2002 vintage will be sourced exclusively from Mendocino. "There is so much potential for it," Swain comments. His affinity for the grape even colors his personal life. "When I got together with my wife in the late '80s, my wife's 'dowry' was three cases of Round Hill 1980 Petite Sirah," he recalls, laughing. Today, the couple's two cats are named Petite (the smaller female) and Sirah (her larger, black brother).

Historically, Parducci has been known as a pioneer in Petite Sirah production, so to celebrate the winery's 70th Anniversary, Swain plans a special bottling coming up.

"The wine has always represented a significant portion of who we are (at least 15-20%)," he notes. Swain also reports that case production will not grow beyond the 15,000 case mark, "at least not for now."

As far as Swain is concerned, "Petite Sirah is California's true Rhone."

Guenoc Winemaker Derek Holstein

Guenoc Estate Vineyards

Derek Holstein, winemaker at Guenoc from the 1987 harvest to the spring of 1996, left for six years to work with the Trinchero Family, then rejoined the Guenoc team in 2002. He is a well-known and respected Davis graduate, experienced in working with winery teams to challenge the status quo in making ever better wines. When returned to Guenoc and Langtry Estate Vineyards and Winery, he was full of excitement, ready to develop great wines borne from the Guenoc's unique soils. Here, he has been able to realize a historic and person vision.

Holstein has had a very well rounded career in winemaking, and has worked for many other prominent winemaking companies, including United Vintners, Christian Brothers, and Domaine Chandon. Derek graduated from UC Davis with a degree in Enology, and finished his MBA program by attending Fresno State and Sonoma State universities.

Derek is extremely literate about the terroir in Lake County; which, according to Derek, presents its own set of unique characteristics. "Guenoc is surrounded by serpentine soil, which isn't as fertile as the more coastal regions. Here, Petite Sirah just naturally expresses its silky, flavorful characteristics. With soil that isn't as fertile, Petite Sirah doesn't need to be controlled as much, as it does in other viticultural regions."

The winemaking team is extremely critical about all the parts of making their Petite Sirah. In his own words, "We approach winemaking the same way a great chef explores the flavors of a dish that he or she's about to create. Each ingredient is unique at the exact time a chef picks it up to feel it, smell it, and ultimately use it. We do the same with all components of our winemaking. At harvest, we select grapes for picking, even if it means dropping crop or leaving it for more hang time, only to be harvested at a later time. We carefully decide which barrels to use. Barrels bring so many spices to the wine, and careful selection is of the utmost importance. We're working toward a consistent effort to create superior wine."

Patty Bogle

Bogle Vineyards & Winery

In the small farming community of Clarksburg, California, the father and son team of Warren and Chris Bogle planted their first 20 acres of grapes along the Sacramento Delta in 1968. They planted Chenin Blanc and Gray Riesling, but the first red grown was Petite Sirah.

"We always explain that we were helped out by the Concannons," says Patty Bogle, general manager of Bogle Vineyards & Winery, which the family officially started in 1979. "Our first cuttings were from the original grapes grown by California's Petite Sirah pioneer."

Sourced from their own vineyard properties in Clarksburg (141 acres) as well as acreage in Monterey and Lodi, the Bogle Petite Sirah production is up to around 90,000 cases. "When everyone else was growing Syrah, we insisted on producing Petite Sirah. We love the flavor, the richness and the fact that's it's such a big wine but also so drinkable," Patty points out.

With such a large case production, the Bogle Petite Sirah has great distribution. "We've been lucky to promote the wine for such a long time and the advantage of having plenty out there at under $10 (suggested retail) has kept the Bogle name and the varietal in the limelight," she adds.

The Bogle family will all pitch in their time and energy to be a part of the Blue Tooth Tour, which Patty Bogle refers to as "an amazing opportunity to spread the word."

During harvest, Patty's late husband Chris would always complain about the finicky grape. "The fruit would always stress out just before harvest," she explains. "But that's why it's ultimately so rich and dark and concentrated. The grapes that come off the vines are wonderful and finally, when you drink the wine, you realize what all the hard work was about. At that point, Chris would go out and just plant more of it."

The Bogles will be pouring the 2001 vintage of Petite Sirah on the first part of the Tour in San Francisco and Los Angeles. The flagship wine of Bogle Vineyards is amazingly inky deep in color, with powerful boysenberry and blackberry scents that lead to trademark jammy notes that fill the mouth with ripe berries. The voluptuous finish lingers, with a toasty, vanilla oak and lush fruit.

The Bogle's have been producing Petite Sirah Port since 1997, using fruit from the "Home Ranch" in Clarksburg for a delight of sweetness and incredible bouquet. "This was prompted by Patty Bogle's love of Port noted by winemaker Chris Smith who thought the extraordinary varietal richness of Petite Sirah made it a natural as a fortified wine.

At $18 a bottle (suggested retail), Bogle Petite Sirah Port is aged in neutral French and American oak for 18 months and results in aromas of ripe plums, with undercurrents of blackberry jams and raisins with an oaky mid-palate. The finish, smooth and sensuous possesses touches of chocolate and leather.

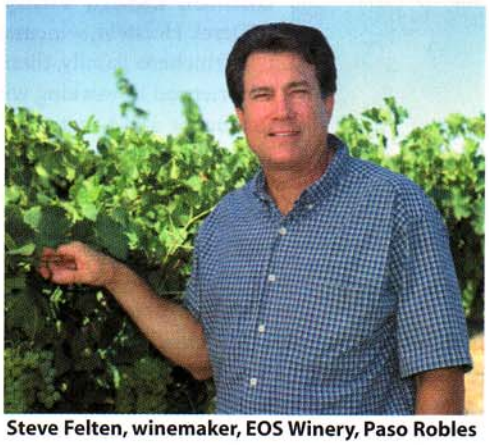
Bogle Winery, nestled along Elk Slough in the River Delta, south of Sacramento.

EOS Winery

"Petite Sirah has always been one of my favorite wines," says Steve Felten, winemaker at EOS Winery in Paso Robles. "When I was a home winemaker 25 years ago, I would buy Petite Sirah grapes from the Russian River Valley – and I continue my dedication to this varietal today."

Felten refers to Petite Sirah as "Syrah with an attitude." He remarks on its depth, its spice and how the combination makes a statement that represents the positive side of California wines. "Petite Sirah is not a snooty or pretentious wine," he insists.

During Felten's nine years as lead Winemaker at EOS, he has lobbied for more acreage for the grape's production. "Our current 2000 release is a Reserve P.S.," he offers, "and with a small case production of four thousand. We decided five years ago that instead of jumping on the Syrah bandwagon, it would behoove us to grow more Petite Sirah. My point of view was that why compete with the Aussies and the Rhone, when we can grown our own California varietal."


Steve Felten, winemaker, EOS Winery, Paso Robles

An additional 88 acres was planted and the 2003 vintage will see a vast increase in EOS's production of Petite Sirah.

Ecstatic about the attention the varietal will be receiving on the Blue Tooth Tour, Felten recalled a time when he couldn't count Petite Sirah producers on one hand. "Now, there are entire shelves devoted to it. I'm tickled that this grape is receiving the same respect that Merlot and Zinfandel achieved in the '60s and '70s."

Mettler Family Vineyard

Mettler Family Vineyard in Lodi

The Mettler family has been farming in Lodi for over 100 years, but their history goes back even further: Centuries, in fact. "The Mettler's were growing grapes in Alsace in the late 1700s," points out current family patriarch, Larry Mettler.

Five generations of growers in Lodi, and still utilizing much of the same property, (accounting for about 250 acres) Mettler's grandparents started a local co-op right after Prohibition. Since then, the co-op was dissolved, but the family continues to farm wine grapes to this day.

"It was my children who wanted to become more involved in wine production," explains Mettler. Oldest daughter Kim, with a Masters degree in psychology, handles marketing, her husband Jason the Vineyard Manager; second daughter Kelly is armed with two degrees: Ag Business and International Wine Marketing from Fresno State. She currently manages the Wine & Visitors Center in Lodi, responsible for dealing with 110 different brands of Lodi wines. Son Adam recently graduated with an Enology degree and after working in Australia and New Zealand wineries, works two jobs: one as an assistant winemaker at a Livermore winery and also at the Mettler Family vineyards.

"We're in the mode of building our brand," notes Mettler of the three-year-own venture that began with the planting of Cabernet Sauvignon.

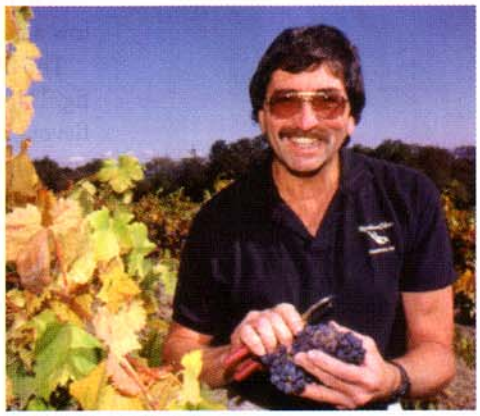
The Mettler's first vintage of Petite Sirah was released this past November and the '01 Lodi appellation retails for about $22. "The grapes are grown right on our property," he reports, "we have a real jewel here, and our vineyards are outstanding."

The small production (500 cases) is just a beginning, and Mettler believes that Lodi can be a wonderful growing region for this varietal, offering warmth for maturity to ripen flavors and extract the proper amount of tannins. "Our Petite Sirah may be big, but it also shows an abundant amount of fruit."

Mettler describes the family's French oak-aged Petite Sirah as bold, with a fruit forward personality that carries a satiny mouth feel and soft tannins. The years of experience as growers carries with it an understanding of using modern, sustainable farming practices that help the environment.

If the future for the smaller grower is to own their own brand, the expertise of understanding the quality of the vineyards leads to the ultimate definition of quality control.

Rosenblum Cellars


Dr. Kent Rosenblum

Dr. Kent Rosenblum sources grapes from every one of California's growing regions. The Alameda County Veterinarian currently produces over 100,000 cases of wine from his 60,000 square foot shipyard warehouse.

Rosenblum's interest in wine began as a hobby and then bloomed into a full-time passion. The winery opened in 1978 in what he refers to as "the worst part of Oakland." Years later he finds himself growing fruit and contracting with growers than encompass 80 different California vineyards.

"I found that I always liked Petite Sirah," claims Rosenblum, who first used it as a blender with Zinfandel. After discovering its smoother, softer nature, he bottled it on its own and now produced two single vineyard Pets. "We'll be increasing to four labels next year," he promises, "and that includes our Petite Sirah version of Chateau la Paws," Rosenblum's play on his California Rhone varietal grapes as well as a reference to his professional association with animals.

"Petite Sirah is California's most under-rated varietal," insists Dr. Rosenblum, who was quite anxious to be a part of the Blue Tooth Tour.

Rosenblum Cellars 2002 Pickett Road Vineyards is a Napa Valley Petite Sirah, primarily from 80-100 year old vines, mixed with some new ones. "This is a meaty, rich and dark Petite," remarks Rosenblum, who compares it to the 2002 Rockpile Road Vineyards Pet from Dry Creek Valley. "Our Rockpile Petite Sirah is an inky monster with more stuffing and pizzazz." It contains old budwood from the Seghesio Home Ranch and is hillside grown.

Rosenblum continues to take budwoods from old vineyards and find head-pruned, dry-farmed vineyards for his future adventures in Petite Sirah.