

## **DAN BERGER: INTEREST IN PETITE SYRAH GROWS**

Dan Berger

Petite sirah is a grape variety that usually isn't so petite and has little to do with syrah (other than being its offspring).

But it is a grape that more and more producers are making into a varietal wine, and more and more are using it to add depth, color and character to their red wine blends.

And consumers are seemingly trying this once-obscure wine with more interest.

It's a wine that surprises me notably because it once had a bad reputation — understandably. By all rights, no one should be making it any more.

Its problems are many. For one thing, when they are released, most petite sirahs are pretty astringent and rustic, and probably should be served with really rustic foods such as wild game, preferably uncooked. Feathers and hides are optional.

For that reason, few wine writers write about petite sirah except to say that it makes a very tannic wine (which isn't always the case).

As a result, only a scant number of retailers or restaurants carry petite sirah.

Oddly, however, it has grown in the last decade and a half. Total California acreage of petite sirah hit a low of 1,700 acres in 1995, but today there are 7,323 acres of it, on more than 120 farms, and some 630 wineries make a wine called petite sirah.

And it hasn't grown rapidly. Rarely in a year are more than a couple of additional acres of it planted.

To harness respect for the grape and the wine, an organization sprang up in 2002 to support it. Today the group, called PS I Love You, has 77 winery members.

Jo Diaz, executive director of PSILY, said the grape was once rarely seen as a varietal.

"But over time, everyone who was buying it

to use for blending began to look at it as a varietal on its own," she said, "and they liked the wine.

"Wine makers love to make it and many producers make 200, 300 cases for the winery tasting room."

Moreover, most petite sirah (the scion of syrah) is being made with less tannin.

Those who made generic red wines decades ago remember petite sirah as the grape that added color and power to all such blends.

In those early days, petite sirah often added depth to otherwise light-colored pinot noir.

Lou Foppiano at Foppiano Vineyards in Sonoma County was one of the pioneers of this grape and this Saturday the man celebrates his 99th birthday, at which a number of older bottlings will be served to guests.

Foppiano long has made two versions, an elegant regular bottling and occasionally a Reserve that's darker and more concentrated.

Wineries that once made the wine include Ridge, ...Concannon...Guenoc, Field Stone, Bogle...

Although many have stopped making it as a varietal, almost all wineries who have the grape in their stables still love it for its hardy, rustic nature and the fact that it seems to be compatible for literally dozens of blends.

Wine of the week: 2007 Clayhouse Adobe Red, Central Coast (\$15) — Petite sirah makes up only 32 percent of this wine, with 44 percent of it zinfandel.

But it's the former grape that grabs the spotlight with racy black cherry fruit and a faint rustic quality that demands red meat to tame the astringency.

Excellent value.

