

PETITE SIRAH

Petite Syrah

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What's in a Name?

PETITE SIRAH (OR SYRAH) is not small in taste — though its grapes are small — and it's not Syrah. For decades, its origins were cloaked in mystery; it was thought to be a clone of Syrah, the noble variety from France's Rhône Valley. But DNA studies by Dr. Carole Meredith of U.C. Davis, showed that it is genetically the same as the French grape Durif and its parents are the Rhône varieties Peloursin and Syrah. And it is one of only two grapes to have its own cheering section — an association dedicated to it — the "PS I Love You" group of California producers.

Before the move to varietal labeling in the '60s, PS was often added to provide color (inky purple), fruit (blackberry) and body to California's bulk wine production or to add richness to some Zinfandels and Barberas.

The first varietal-labeled Petite Sirahs were in the 1960s (most used the Petite Sirah spelling, but several still use the Petite Syrah or even Petit Syrah spelling) though a couple of failed attempts were made in the '40s under the name Durif. Pioneers were Concannon and Souverain wineries, which both first produced PS in 1961, followed by Cresta Blanca, Stags' Leap Winery and Inglenook.

Kevin Morrissey, winemaker at Stags' Leap, spoke to the Wine Media Guild of NY a few weeks ago. He noted that in the mid-'70s, there were 14,000 acres of PS planted in CA. Now there are about 4,000.

But even given the decline in acreage, the grape has done better abroad than in its native south of France, where it is now almost extinct. PS has adapted nicely to the drier climates of California and northeastern Victoria, Australia. Now, sixty California wineries make varietal Petite Sirahs, the largest being Bogle. And the grape is showing up in vineyards in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico.

Petite Sirah wines have flavors of dark fruits, primarily blackberry mixed with black pepper notes from its Syrah lineage. Its small berries result in a high skin-to-juice ratio, which means Petite Sirah wines have high tannins. They are also high in acidity, so have good aging potential; they age slowly and can be cellared up to ten or more years. And they make great Ports.

PETITE SIRAHs (All are from California unless noted. * indicates one of my favorites.)

Concannon Reserve 2004 Petite Sirah
Deep purple color with lots of jammy blackberries in the aroma and taste. There are notes of chalk from the tannins. (\$12) Value.

Huntington Wine Cellars 2005 Petite Sirah
Cherry, blueberry and some spice — you could bake with this wine! It's rich and full in the mouth. Tinge of sweetness and lots of fruit. (\$12)

Parducci True Grit 2004 Petite Sirah
Midnight black with scent of blueberry and aisan spices. Black cherry, but for all the dark notes, fairly easy to drink if a bit rough on the finish. (\$24)

* Cecchetti Wine Company Line 39 2006 Petite Sirah Lake County
Rustic but complex. A full-bodied wine tasting of dark fruits and cherries. (\$15) Value.

Berryessa Gap Vineyards 2005 Petite Sirah Reserve Yolo County
More dark fruit in a soft, chewy wine. (\$18) Value.

Big House 2005 Prodigal Son Paso Robles
Dark, rich but strangely spare on the finish. (\$15)

* Michael David Winery 2005 Petite Sirah Lodi
Blueberries and plums with the chalky tannin overtones. (\$18) Value.

Foppiano 2004 Estate Petite Sirah Russian River
Black fruit aromas and tastes. Vanilla from the oak and eastern spices. (\$25)

* Ehrhardt Estates Winery 2004 Petite Sirah Clarksburg
Lush layers of berry flavors, spice and the pepper. Some tasters found a hint of leather. (\$28)

* Concannon Captain Joe's Petite Sirah
Cassis blackberry, spice and pepper. Easy drinking. (\$30)

* Mounts 2006 Estate Petite Sirah Dry Creek Valley
More pie-like aromas — blueberry and vanilla. Complex and nicely balanced. One of my favorites (\$32)

