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Petite Sirah Steps Forward

Often confused with Syrah, this French-born grape has an identity all its own

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At the First Noble Petite Sirah Symposium, held last August at Foppiano Vineyards, Lou Foppiano stated loud and clear that “We’re trying to write the book on Petite Sirah.” But as any writer will tell you, writing a book and getting it published are two different endeavors.

The “book” that Foppiano was talking about could turn out to be an adventure novel, telling about the roller coaster ride that Petite Sirah has been on in California for more than 100 years, or it might be a mystery, unmasking Petite Sirah’s true ancestry. Whatever the form, the story of Petite Sirah is one of resurrection and survival. Petite Sirah did, after all, play an important role in the history of California wine and its supporters are working hard today to assure that their “Pet” will be an important part of California’s wine future.

In today’s multi-varietal wine market, propping up the image of Petite Sirah is not easy, especially when you look at its past history. In less than 20 years, Petite Sirah plantings have been up and down, with a high of 13,000 acres in 1975, to a low of 1,400 acres in 1990. By 1999, the rise for plantings of Petite Sirah in California was up to 3,208 acres. According to an organization of Petite Sirah advocates, called “P.S. I Love You,” there are now 61 California producers of Petite Sirah, plus two more in Washington state and one in Wisconsin, and more than 60 growers, not to mention the odd grower of Petite Sirah in Australia and Argentina.

Historian Charles Sullivan claims that Petite Sirah came into the Napa Valley in 1878, less than a decade after Dr. Durif, a grape breeder at the University of Montpellier, developed a grape which, not surprisingly, became known as Durif. “Petite Sirah has been on the site since 1896 and our oldest vines were planted in 1915,” says Foppiano about the family’s estate plantings of Petite Sirah outside Healdsburg. Until the early 1970s, though, Petite Sirah was one of many red varieties that made up what was known as a field blend. Wines made from these grapes were seldom labeled as varietals, thus Petite Sirah suffered from anonymity.

How to deal with this lack of identity? Grape researchers knew that Petite Sirah had French ancestry, they just weren’t sure of its specific parentage. Thus,

there was the question of Petite Sirah’s “noble” status, which would elevate the grape to the same hierarchy as sanctioned noble varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Two separate references by the French ampelographer Pierre Galet addresses Petite Sirah’s noble status from an oblique angle. In his 1970’s *Practical Ampelography*, Galet identified Petite Sirah as Durif, an assertion that doesn’t lessen the controversy, especially since in a list of 36 “Great Grape Varieties,” published recently in the *Hachette Wine Guide: Grape Varieties*, Galet ignores both Durif and Petite Sirah.

And so it was left to the wonders of DNA fingerprinting, the ubiquitous test that is proving and disproving so many things in modern life, to show once and for all the background and family of Petite Sirah. Is Petite Sirah the same as the French grape Durif or not? Syrah (or if you prefer, Shiraz), Petite Sirah: what’s the connection? In 1996, U.C. Davis professor Dr. Carole Meredith put the controversy to rest, citing her research into the origins of Petite Sirah. In DNA testing, Dr. Meredith and her colleagues concluded that “Petite Sirah is always Durif,” that is, they are two names for the same variety, like Syrah and Shiraz. Further, she discovered that Petite Sirah is an off-spring of Syrah. “Every grape variety has two parents ... in the case of Petite Sirah, those two parents are Syrah and Peloursin (an obscure French variety).”

Of course, there’s more to the Syrah/Petite Sirah association. While California growers and winemakers were working with Petite Sirah, lovers of hearty reds were tuning their palates for the likes of Cote Rotie and Hermitage, the Rhone Valley reds made from Syrah. At the other end of the world, Australian winemakers were making big concentrated red wines called Shiraz, the Aussie name for Syrah. It was soon apparent that the transplanted Rhone Syrah had morphed in the climate and soils of Australia’s great wine regions, like Barossa, the Hunter and McLaren Vale, to become Shiraz, a distinct Australian version of Syrah.

By the latter part of the 20th century, Syrah had made its way to California, riding on the popularity of Australian Shiraz in the U.S. In a recent issue of

Foppiano's "Petite Report," Dr. Meredith wrote about the relationship between Petite Sirah and Syrah. "... They are different varieties, and that (for a long time) was taken as a good basis for denigrating Petite Sirah, because it wasn't Syrah ... and, how dare it pretend to be Syrah." Indeed, for a while, the growing interest in Syrah was bad news for Petite Sirah. Consumers cast a wary eye at Petite Sirah as a dark, brooding and coarse pretender to the more fruit-forward, friendly Syrah.

Lovers of Petite Sirah hardly endorse this pretense, believing that Petite Sirah is good enough to stand on its own and does not need to be compared to Syrah. A typical Petite Sirah, say from Foppiano's, Stags' Leap Winery, Christopher Creek, Concannon, Guenoc or Ridge, smells of black currants with a touch of black pepper and is packed with rich, sometimes slightly jammy, blackberry and currant flavors and supported by firm tannins and lots of oak. Syrah is also dark in color, but the aromatics are brighter raspberry or blackberry, with floral, smoky notes, occasionally seasoned with just a pinch of pepper.

Carl Doumani, a vintner who made his reputation with Stags' Leap Winery Petite Sirah and is now producing Petite under his new brands, Quixote and Panza, says any place he's planted Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah together "has been terrific." Others, like Mick Schroeter at Geyser Peak Winery, have had more mixed results, but generally agree that Petite Sirah does better on hillsides than flatlands and if controlling vigor is a concern, to avoid deeper soils for more rocky terrain. "Livermore Valley soils are mostly rocky," says Tom Lane, winemaker for Concannon. Audrey Cilurzo of Cilurzo Vineyards in Temecula, who has reported success with Petite Sirah since the 1960s, prefers granite and sandy soils. Paul Foppiano likes Petite Sirah from benchland vineyards and claims the vines "don't do well with wet feet."

G rowers contend that Petite Sirah planted in warmer areas is less peppery, a flavor characteristic often associated with the wine. Tom Lane of Concannon Vineyard says it's the berry-fruit and mushroom qualities that separate Petite Sirah from Syrah. Others note that Petite Sirah is fruit-driven, with black currant and berry flavors. Today's winemakers are concerned with flavor or phenolic ripeness, with most saying that flavor ripeness for Petite Sirah occurs above 24 Brix but picking usually commences before the grapes reach 27 Brix. Still, there is disagreement, based mainly on where the grapes are grown, when soft round tannins are present, with many winemakers claiming at least 24 Brix.

The same diversity of opinions about Petite Sirah in the vineyard follows through to the winemaking. Many Petite Sirahs are 100 percent varietal, while some wineries blend in other varieties such as Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre, giving the wine a "Rhône" personality hung on a California framework. One of the contentious techniques that winemakers like to quibble over is the length of maceration. Most winemakers say that five weeks is too long, but Tom Lane at Concannon believes in extended maceration for Petite Sirah, "usually five weeks." Kent Rosenblum adds that presoaking helps obtain softer tannins.

The majority opinion seems to be that a mix of American oak and French oak for aging Petite Sirah is best. Derek Holstein, winemaker for Guenoc Winery, says, "Generally, we prefer American oak, but we use both French and American oak for the reserves." Tom Lane uses both French and American oak in his barrel aging program, "Petite Sirah sucks up oak," he says. Bill Regan, winemaker for Foppiano, is more specific: "All American oak for the regular Petite Sirah and only French oak for the Reserves." Steve Galvin, winemaker for Panza, from Quixote Winery, claims, "We started out using American oak, went to French oak, then back to American oak and now believe that American oak is very good for our wines."

When it comes to Petite Sirah, winemakers will argue about how many grapes will fit on the head of a barrel, but for the consumer the best way to define your own preferences for Petite Sirah is to taste, taste and taste some more. If you are attracted to Syrah and still believe that Petite Sirah lacks finesse, then look for these Petite Sirahs: 1997 Pacific Star Mendocino, light and fruity; 1999 Panza Napa Valley, bright berry flavors with good structure; 2000 Rosenblum Dry Creek Valley Rockpile, beautifully balanced with layered flavors and firm tannins; 2000 David Bruce Central Coast, lovely juicy flavors and great length; 1998 Guenoc Winery Serpentine Meadow; deep and intense, with bright flavors; 1997 Concannon Livermore Valley Reserve, excellent texture and structure, layered flavors, long balanced finish. Whatever your style, one thing that comes through in all of the wines is that Petite Sirah ain't so petite.