

As Seen In . .

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CALIFORNIA PETITE SIRAH

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California vintners sure must like Petite Sirah. In 2005, The Chronicle received 35 of them to taste. Last year that increased to 65, and this year we received 99 wines. Prices are rising too. Three-quarters of the bottles were \$20 or more, topping out at \$60.

This inky bruiser of a grape finds its parentage in two Rhone varieties: noble and prolific Syrah, and the obscure Peloursin, known mostly for being the mother of Petite Sirah.

Comparisons often are drawn to Zinfandel, another grape that California has embraced as its own. The ripe fruit flavors do match up, but Petite Sirah has something most Zins don't: major-league tannins that can throw their weight around.

Those tannins can be a problem. We detected a good share of off flavors, but even some wines with pretty fruit became unruly and fierce on the finish. The more likely comparison is to Tannat, the fiercely tannic grape of southwest France and Uruguay. Tannat inspired the process of micro-oxygenation, in which tiny bubbles are released into wine in hopes of softening the tannins. I found myself thinking fondly about micro-ox during the tasting, something I never thought would happen.

When wines were pulled from their bags, names both familiar and unfamiliar had failed to cut the mustard -- or perhaps the plum preserves, since that was the dominant flavor. We did quite enjoy several bottles, and those are listed below. But with all the Petite Sirah out there, here's hoping our next encounter is more satisfying.

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TWO AND A HALF STARS 2003 Lolonis Winegrower Selection Sisters Blend Redwood Valley Petite Sirah (\$32) Petros Lolonis and his family have long championed Redwood Valley fruit, and his winery seems to have a knack for finding the best in Petite Sirah with its Orpheus. This blend (produced by Jed Steele before current winemaker Lori Knapp arrived) pays tribute to two sisters, Betty Foster and Mary Louise Chase, who own the two vineyards that provide fruit for this wine, both of which are farmed using organic practices. Waxy, slightly charred oak overtones on the nose lead to lush plum and sour cherry highlights, with a pleasantly tapered finish. Best of the tasting.

TWO STARS 2003 Ripken Vineyards & Winery Idyllwild Station Lodi Petite Sirah (\$25) This Lodi-based winery had its first crush in 2003, but the Ripken family is plenty familiar with grapes -- they've grown them for nearly 60 years. With this bottling of just 70 cases, they play homage to a local inn. Big scents of burnt branch and spice, with good basic plum and blackberry flavors. A bit simple, but the tannins are held in check. Some sweetness and heat surge at the very end. Winery only.

TWO STARS 2004 Victor Hugo Paso Robles Petite Sirah (\$18) Victor Hugo Roberts first planted vines surrounding his Templeton home, just southeast of Paso Robles, in 1985. The wine is dominated by lush blackberry and oaky vanilla notes from 16 months in American oak, with a healthy dose of perceptible sweetness for those who like it that way. The acidity makes it buoyant, with a good, gripping finish. Limited availability.

KEY: FOUR STARS...Extraordinary, THREE STARS...Excellent, TWO STARS...Good