

MUCH-DENIGRATED PETITE SIRAH GETS MORE RESPECT

John Winthrop Haeger, Special to The Chronicle



St. Helena vintner Fulton Mather runs David Fulton Winery.



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Fulton Mather's Petite Sirah in the vineyard.



Fulton Mather's Petite Sirah in the bottle.

Over the last decade, while infatuations with Pinot Noir and Pinot Grigio have grabbed some of California's wine business headlines, a stealth story has been woven around Petite Sirah.

Yes, Petite Sirah - Zinfandel's buddy in the handful of mixed-red heritage vineyards that still survive from Dry Creek to Lodi. The majority tenant in Napa Valley vineyards until the Cabernet revolution. Even now, it's an unsung component in numerous blends.

Following two decades of precipitous decline, California vineyard acreage devoted to Petite Sirah has more than quadrupled since 1999. More than 600 wineries now produce it, up from just 65.

"It's big like Cabernet and shares Cabernet's denseness," observes Fulton Mather, a retired software engineer and owner of David Fulton Winery who inherited a St. Helena vineyard first planted in 1860 and dedicated primarily to Petite Sirah since the 1930s, "but varietal Petite does not put you off. The fruit is rich and it hits you with strong flavors. We sell out of our own wine every year, and have a waiting list of people who want to buy grapes."

HARDLY ELEGANT

Notwithstanding its long history in California - the first vines were imported from France in the 1880s - Petite Sirah is not the likeliest candidate for star status at a time when, we are told, consumers are edging toward elegance. Even flattering descriptions paint a picture of massive, tannic wines with inky colors and rich, ripe flavors of blackberry, boysenberry pie, black pepper and bittersweet chocolate. Some tasters report "tooth-staining," "rambunctious" and "thermonuclear" wines.

It follows that Petite, by and large, is not a favorite of sommeliers. Joseph Spellman, a Master Sommelier and wine educator for Justin Vineyards in Paso Robles (San Luis Obispo County) who previously ran the wine program at Charlie Trotter's in Chicago, finds something "heavy, clumsy, raw and unfinished" about Petite. He confesses he is "not an advocate."

"I have never heard anyone say that it makes a profound or classical wine," he adds. Winemakers generally agree that Petite appeals to folks who already like very big wines. "Millennial males," suggests Michael Martella, winemaker for Thomas Fogarty Winery. "It has more power than Zin," he says.



Miroslav Tcholakov, the winemaker at Trentadue, says he finds a lot of women, especially in the Midwest, who love Petite Sirah. "They are the same women who like strong espresso," he explains.

Plainly, however, it has a growing fan club. Makers of small-lot versions report that it sells out first among their red varietals, even when the wine commands upwards of \$35 a bottle. And larger producers like Bogle and Concannon, which each account for more than 100,000 cases of Petite annually, continue to increase production. Wines like Mather's appear perennially on wine lists of restaurants like Gary Danko, the French Laundry and Chez Panisse. It probably helps that boutique Petite Sirah has broken the glass ceiling on critical scores for obscure varieties, sometimes landing 92 or 94 points.

Credit goes to serious viticulture and winemaking, which was rarely applied to Petite Sirah until fairly recently. The latter, in particular, has been focused on taming its infamous tannins.

DIFFERENT METHODS

Trentadue's Tcholakov argues that Petite "wants to be treated like Pinot Noir," by which he means fermentations in open-top tanks nursed with gentle punch-downs, and no extended maceration. Some makers manage the tannins by segregating each press fraction and back blending very judiciously. A lot of energy is invested in barrel choices since Petite behaves like "the oak sponge of the wine world," says Martella.

David Fulton Petites are raised in thin-stave barrels for 30 months. Longer hang times are also part of the campaign against harsh tannins, although this practice often translates into high alcohol and pH, which can create other problems.

A few makers, like Lodi's Michael-David Wines, soften Petite with a process called micro-oxygenation, already widely used to make "modern" editions of high-tannin varieties like Tannat and Malbec.

In the vineyard, growers are leaving fewer grapes on the vine. Petite Sirah from the Central Valley, destined for jug wines, used to be farmed to yield between eight and 10 tons per acre; today's yields average half that.

Even so, most winemakers argue that Petite's truest vocation remains as a blending grape. Even most varietal Petite has been adjusted with a bit of Syrah, Carignane or Zinfandel to provide some bright red fruit flavors and elegance. The converse practice - blending Petite into varietal Zinfandel, Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah - is widespread. Though Mendocino's Fetzer Vineyards no longer makes varietal Petite Sirah, longtime winemaker Dennis Martin sources as much Petite as he can find because "it's a great, great blending tool." Most of Fetzer's 150,000 cases of Zinfandel contain at least 10 percent to aid color and structure, while its Cabernets use 5 to 6 percent for "spice and tannin."

BLENDING STAR

Ridge Vineyards is another firm believer in Petite as a blender; Ridge Zins have absorbed about 85 tons of Petite in each recent vintage, according to David Gates, Ridge's vice president for vineyard operations. Ravenswood's Lodi Zinfandel is 14 percent Petite; Rosenblum's North Coast blend is 11 percent. Ciatti Company's Glenn Proctor, who brokers grapes statewide, says a lot of Zin "wouldn't taste like Zin without Petite Sirah." He calls it a "little satchel of magic for winemakers."

The truth is that demand for Petite as a blender, not as a varietal, was the main reason its renaissance began in 1995. When interest in serious red Zinfandel rescued that variety between 1990 and 1996, Zin's makers needed Petite to make decently structured wines. Simple arithmetic reveals that much less than half - perhaps no more than one-third - of last year's total California crop of Petite was used to make varietal wine.

At Press, Leslie Rudd's St. Helena steakhouse, sommelier Erin O'Shea builds a story around Petite's history as a blender, explaining to guests that "it's always been there in wines you know and love, but behind the scenes." O'Shea's list features 17 Petite Sirahs. She sells it as a "more floral wine" than Cabernet, with an interesting texture that "marries perfectly with steak and anything rich."

Tamer tannins, serious winemakers, better wines and a growing supply of well-farmed grapes may not have positioned Petite as the new Merlot, but a varietal niche for Petite now seems secure - alongside



its long-standing role as a supporting player to other wines. Add in the right slice of grilled beef or roasted boar, or even a wedge of cheese like Reblochon or Maroilles, and intrepid tasters can see its potential.

TASTING NOTES

2005 Lava Cap El Dorado Granite Hill Vineyard "Reserve" (\$30) Dusty, mineral nose suggestive of wet slate with a hint of cola; blueberry, raspberry and chocolate on the palate; big, warm, fine-grained and well knit, very attractive.

2006 Robert Biale "Royal Punishers" Napa Valley (\$40) Opaque and nearly black; India ink and wetted whetstone aromas; high-toned in the mouth with some fresh berry, citrus peel and sweet-sourness; smooth attack, then fleshy, considerable tannin on the back palate.

2006 Michael Martella Mendocino Heart Arrow Ranch (\$35) Rosy magenta color; generous aromas of tobacco and fir balsam; spice, camphor, lingonberry and minerality on the palate; smooth, velvety texture; mouth-coating, warm, ripe and attractive.

2006 Truett-Hurst "Burning Man" North Coast (\$33) Pretty, limpid magenta; vanilla, citrus peel and dark berry fruit aromas; bold in the mouth with abundant, sweet, fresh fruit flavors and a touch of smoked meat; substantial barrel influence; considerable grip from mid-palate to finish.

2007 Bogle California (\$12) Nose marked with stewed vegetables, raisins and cut grass; red berry fruit on the palate; modestly extracted; medium weight; slightly fruit-sweet overall.

2005 Concannon Livermore Valley "Reserve" (\$38) Very ripe fruit compote aromas plus rhubarb, mint and barrel char; dried cherries, coconut and vanilla on the palate; significantly extracted and noticeable grippy from midpalate to finish.

2006 Parducci Mendocino County (\$11) Attractive, near-elegant, red-fruited nose; dried cherries and blackberries on the palate; taut then slightly grippy; attractive and very good value for money.

- J.W.H.