

A PRIMER ON WHAT TO POUR

Grape expectations

Featured grape: Petite sirah (peh-teet see-rah); red.

What it is: One of the most misunderstood grapes in the bunch, petite sirah is neither petite in style nor completely syrah. A University of California Davis DNA paternity test in 1998 finally straightened out petite's long-baffling heritage. Known as durif when it was brought to California in the late 1880s from southern France, the grape promptly got a catchier name. Some theorize the moniker derives from the vine's small (petite) berry size; others think it was a way to distance it from the less-than-noble durif.

Over the next 90 or so years, petite sirah grew to become one of the most widely planted grapes in California (until it was done in by the cab craze). Its vigorous vines made it easy to grow; its deep color and prominent tannins added heft to lesser wines. And while producers like Concannon, Foppiano and Stag's Leap found a following when they bottled it as a single varietal, it wasn't until the DNA results revealed the grape's more lofty roots that it earned real respect.

Turns out petite sirah is a cross between the ancient and obscure Rhône grape peloursin and the regal syrah.

Expect this: Big, brawny and black, petite sirah "is not for the faint of heart," says Bob Barnett of Vintage Wines in Miramar. Inky and full-bodied with powerhouse pepper and blackberry flavors, it's not a wine to sip and savor. "I don't know anyone who buys petite sirah for finesse," Barnett says.

Goes with: When you fire up the grill this Fourth of July, skip the cab cliché and pair petite sirah with steak, ribs, sausage or burgers. Its "massive structure and brooding rustic, sensual flavors make it one of the best friends a grilled steak can have," Karen MacNeil writes in her "Wine Bible."

GRAPE PICKS

Budget: Nobody does budget wine better than Bogle, and Bogle's best is its petite sirah. The 2006 is smoky and satisfying. About \$10 to \$12. (Widely available at grocery stores.)

Midrange: Rich, plummy and surprisingly smooth and balanced, Vina Robles' 2005 Paso Robles Jardine is a great introductory petite. \$26. (Costco; vinarobles.com)

Splurge: The 2004 David Fulton, a petite pioneer, looks like liquid obsidian, tastes like fireworks in a glass. Not overly oaked, as some higher-ends petites can be. (\$39.99 at Holiday Wine Cellar, Escondido; \$35.99 at Vintage Wines; \$45.99 at WineSellar & Brasserie, Sorrento Mesa)

Prices vary. While supplies last; call for availability. If your retailer doesn't carry a wine, ask if it can be ordered.

The unexpected: With durif nearly extinct in France and petite rarely grown outside California, it is, like zinfandel, an American classic, a most patriotic beverage.

VINO LINGO

Petite sirah is sometimes spelled petite syrah. And syrah and shiraz are synonymous (it's syrah in France and the U.S., shiraz in Australia and South Africa). But you will end up red-faced if you ever refer to petite sirah as petite shiraz. There's nothing confusing about that – it's just wrong.

– MICHELE PARENTE

