

TASTING NOTES

By Chris Sherman

There's much more petite sirah than there used to be. Old vineyards and new are in warm California regions from Mendocino down to Santa Barbara.

Most is drinkable on release yet at 14 percent alcohol or more, is better after a few minutes in the glass. The best examples merit waiting five years or more and can last 10 or more in the cellar.

Most sell for \$8 to \$20; top reserves hit \$50. They are almost always great value for the price.

- Petite sirah, Bogle, 2004 (\$10).

Dark, inky, with plums and berries and a dash of ground pepper. Lush texture, but not as full or big as the best. Easy place to start.

- Petite sirah, Concannon, Central Coast, 2003 (\$15).

Pioneer petite is the winery flagship and one of the most widely sold. Full and rich with all the right berries and fruit, a bit of spice, and soft creamy texture. Good drinking now and later.

- Petite sirah, David Bruce, Central Coast, 2003 (\$18). One of California's original grapes and one of its original wizards combine to make a bright basket of berries, with a soft, easy texture and a long finish. Finger paint for the palate.

- Petite sirah, Michael-David, Earthquake, 2003, Lodi (\$50, a hunt in Florida).

A megaton fruit bomb plus a warehouse of coffee, cocoa and cigars, yet still elegant and luscious. Blew away big California contests and blows me down too.

- Phantom, Bogle, Clarksburg, 2002 (\$18).

A commemorative high-end blend for Bogle, more than half petite (plus zin and mourvedre). Powerful juice combines berries, pumpkin pie, roasting fire and smoke into jam. Black as night and as enveloping.

- Rockpile petite sirah, Rosenblum Cellars, Rockpile Road Vineyard (\$40, rare).

Exceptional bundle of rich smoky aromas, chocolate blackberries in the mouth, syrupy texture and 15.4 percent alcohol. The reverie of leaning back into the embrace of a deep old club chair after a grand meal, port and pipe.

- Zinfandel, Ridge, Three Valleys 2002, (\$24).

The zin genius combined a dozen vineyards to make this zin, dark purple and voluptuous, bursting with juicy ripeness. Petite is only 8 percent, but I swear you can taste it. A keeper.

