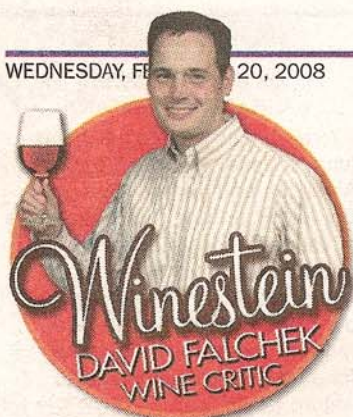


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Petite sirah delivers big flavor

Petite sirah might be the best red wine you aren't drinking.

With reds such as merlot, cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir and syrah capturing the spotlight, you have to root around to find the often overlooked petite sirah. But the look is often worth it.

Don't let the name fool you, there's nothing small about petite sirah. Most often, it makes a huge wine with gargantuan flavor, color and weight. It gets its name from the size of its berries at harvest. Rather than the nickel-sized globes of most ripe wine grapes, petite sirah has small, marble-sized berries. Much of red wines' color and flavor comes from the skins.

That's why petite sirah is the bomb. Even the inexpensive ones can pack a flavorful punch.

The grape traces its roots to a French grape known as durif. Some petite sirah can be found in Australia and South Africa, but its foothold is in California, where it's been for more than 100 years.

Peaked early

Petite sirah plantings peaked in 1976, when most of the 14,000 acres was used in anonymous jug wines. Then it was sidelined, with acreage falling to a low in 1995 of 1,700 acres.

Still low on the radar of most wine drinkers, the tannic and deeply colored grape turns up in unlikely places. If you ever had pinot noir that looks curiously dark and rich, the wine-maker probably put in a dash of petite sirah.

A group of wineries teamed up to form a petite sirah advocacy group, "P.S. I Love You." Despite the cutesy name, the Web site, www.psiloveyou.org, is more trade- than consumer-oriented but has some great information.

I tried some petite sirah between \$13 and \$30. The more expensive ones clearly deliver more for the money. Barrel aging is almost obligatory to tame the sometimes rough petite sirah tannins, so they all had a woody, oak spice element to them with varying amounts of fruit. In Pennsylvania's stores, Clay Station and Crane Lake have petite sirah for \$8 and \$5, respectively, offering an even cheaper introduction, although I haven't tried them.

As the name suggests, **Earthquake 2005 Petite Sirah** from Lodi is moving. Big and complex with blackberry and black currant, brown sugar and hickory flavors, the wine is smooth, balanced with a vanilla finish. It's an excellent, honest, examples of petite sirah. Have it with lamb. \$28. 

Napa Valley Winery Girard says you have to take your hinges off the door to get its **2005 Petite Sirah** in your house — it's that big. The wine has smoky, cured-meat smells and tastes of savory spice and dark plum with a cedary finish. A special order wine in Pennsylvania, but worth mentioning because Girard makes a range of very good wines. Try with pepper-rubbed steak. \$28. 

When petite sirah was nearly extinct, Bogle never gave up on it and have made a petite sirah since 1979. **Bogle 2005 California Petite Sirah** is weighty with seedy, ripe plum, and ground pepper flavors offering a nice introduction to petite sirah. Try with grilled portabella mushrooms. \$13. 

Grades: Exceptional 

Above average , Good 

Below average , Poor 

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psiloveyou.org