

Petite Sirah: It's Bigger Than You Think

Catherine Fallis



A luscious wine with a small name and big taste, Petite Sirah is somewhat of a Rodney Dangerfield of the wine world—misunderstood, under-appreciated, and only recently gaining respect as a stand-alone varietal. Deep in color, with lip-smacking flavors of ripe blackberries and huckleberries, and sometimes a dash of freshly ground black pepper, Petite Sirah is a welcome change of pace from the usual suspects in the red line-up. Although traditionally thought of as a blending grape, this distinctive wine also has the body and character to stand on its own as the ideal partner to cooler-weather fare.

Like Zinfandel, Petite Sirah is an all-American grape (though we have proof now that Zinfandel is actually the same as the Croatian Crljenak) in that we have many plantings here, primarily in California, along with a few in South America and Australia, but very little

elsewhere in the world. The average age of vines is much older, by decades, than our other grape varieties. In fact, California wine literature as early as the 1880s refers to this varietal.

Petite Sirah has made itself known in many interesting Rhône and proprietary blends, lending the wine body, color, and a bit of an edge. Paul Draper of Ridge Vineyards in Santa Cruz adds Petite Sirah to his Zinfandels for ageability and backbone—mouth-puckering fruit tannins balance out the rich, ripe, alcoholic wine, and extend its life in bottle. Many producers of Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir also use it to shore up their wines in lighter vintages.

Though many connect Petite Sirah with Syrah, a red grape that earned its reputation in France's Rhône Valley for the sultry, smoky wines of Côte Rotie and Hermitage, the two are not related. Farmers in the Rhône Valley class their Syrah as Grosse Syrah and Petite Syrah.

Master Sommelier



Grosse Syrah, also known as Mondeuse (Savoie, France) and Refosco (Friuli, Italy), is the vigorous, more productive of the two, while Petite Syrah, referring to its smaller berries, is the more highly regarded, and is shortened to Syrah. Adding to the confusion, American producers are allowed to use either Petite Sirah or Petite Syrah on the label, so they may be calling Petite Sirah "Petite Syrah."

Since Petite Sirah has no real counterpart in Europe, American winemakers don't have a classic model to emulate. This makes for a lot of latitude and variation in style. A typical California Petite Sirah from Mendocino, such as Guenoc or Parducci, is medium-bodied and juicy, while those from Sonoma such as Foppiano or Napa Valley's Louis Martini are medium- to full-bodied and supple. The lavishly oaked Stags' Leap Napa Valley bottling is very rich with sweet flavors and barrel tannins. At the lighter end of the spectrum, Bogle, from the Sacramento Delta, is very accessible and fruity.

Serve lighter versions with everyday casual foods including meatloaf, barbecued tri-tip, and grilled sausages. Try the medium-bodied bottlings with roast chicken or turkey, or veal piccata, and the richest with seared pork loin, or grilled flank steak. After sampling a few Petite Sirahs, you'll most likely agree that there's nothing small about it—and you'll give it the respect it deserves.

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