

PETITE SIRAH WARMS THE SPIRIT ON A COLD DAY

By Jerry Shriver

When you've just trudged back to the house after cutting that cord of wood or dropping the brood off at fall soccer practice, you need an appropriately hardy cold-weather wine as your reward. Something to put the circulation back in your tootsies and stop your nose from running.

Petite Sirah is that wine.

For years, the Petite Sirah grape has languished in obscurity, mainly because of its unfortunate name.

The grape yields a wine that is anything but petite. It's full of chewy, burly tannins and lush, ripe fruit. Its color is so dark and texture so thick, you'll think you're pouring used motor oil, and it's relatively high in alcohol, usually 13.5% to 15%.

To make matters worse, it's often confused with the better-known Syrah grape. The two are genetically linked, but the Petite Sirah produces a much bigger, sturdier wine. Maybe if the original French name of Durif would have stuck, things would have turned out differently.

At any rate, some Petite Sirah is still grown in France, where it's used to add color and body to blends, and Australia has some vines.

But California is where the action is, where the wine is beginning to come into its own. There, it has always been one of those rustic quaffers that winemakers like to drink deep into the evening after the beer has run out, the way they used to drink Zinfandel before it took on fancy airs and high prices.

Now, Petite Sirah is swaggering into the public consciousness. It even has its own advocacy group, P.S. I Love You (psiloveyou.org), which reports that the number of domestic producers has jumped to 388, up from 67 five years ago, and the number of acres planted with the grape has nearly doubled since 1999, to 6,523.



Those numbers still are relatively tiny, but they mean that you'll have an easier time finding the variety on your store shelf, even if you live outside California. The wines now showing up seem to fall into two broad camps. The lesser ones tend to have tannins that are out of control and concentrated but one-dimensional fruit flavors — all power but no glory. The standouts have substantial but ripe and manageable tannins and are full of sweet plum, blackberry and cassis flavors that can be heightened by chocolate, coffee, pepper and brown-spice notes. Most cost \$15 to \$40.

Two superstars worth tracking down are the 2004 Trentadue "La Storia" Petite Sirah, Alexander Valley, Sonoma County, about \$28; and the 2005 Miro Petite Sirah, Sommers Vineyard, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County, about \$30. Both are rich, robust, complex and seductive.

Here are some more that stood out in a recent tasting of 25 currently available versions (retail prices are approximate):

- Trentadue, North Coast, \$18.
- 2004 Parducci "True Grit," Mendocino, \$25
- 2005 Michael-David Petite Sirah, Lodi, \$22
- 2005 Bogle Vineyards, Calif., \$11
- 2004 Earthquake, Lodi, \$28
- 2004 Silkwood, San Joaquin County, \$39.
- 2004 Foppiano, Russian River Valley, \$23
- 2005 J.C. Cellars, Frediani Vineyard, Napa Valley, \$45
- 2005 Rosenblum Cellars, Appellation Series Heritage Clones, San Francisco Bay, \$18
- 2004 EOS Reserve, Paso Robles, \$25
- 2004 Mettler Family Vineyards, Lodi, \$22