

Petite Sirah, the John Wayne of Winegrape Varieties

By Jo Diaz

Petite Sirah, the John Wayne of Grapes, is our All-American Legend. This story was originally written on May 8, 2005, as I was preparing for taking the members of PS I Love You on a road trip across America in a motor home. We traveled from San Francisco to Houston, then from Boston to Miami... And it was clear to all of us as we traveled, bringing Petite Sirah to members of the trade, they sort of already knew that PS was very American, but we drove the point home.

In another road trip, Tim Thornhill proudly showed his new Parducci Pettie Sirah label to me, called True Grit, and said he was inspired by this story... This the story that inspired Parducci's True Grit.

Imagine, if you will, being plucked from your homeland shortly after being born. (Some would argue that you were ostracized.) You're brought to the Atlantic, where you board a steamship headed for America. You land in New York, are put onto the next train headed to California, and you never look back. You're Durif, about to morph into Petite Sirah, the All-American variety.

According to wine industry historian Charles Sullivan, Charles McIver of Linda Vista Vineyards (Mission San Jose) imported Durif to the U.S. in 1884, and coined it "Petite Sirah." Affection? Size of the grape? Couldn't pronounce "Durif?" Just didn't want the father's name to be dropped forever because it would make it harder to tell the story? Who knows... That's lost forever, and continues the mystery of our legend.

What McIver is responsible for is that he brought the "Wild West" its greatest "Wild Child." And, like so many others that have made the arduous, culture-shock journey, this is where it ultimately has flourished. Petite Sirah has been fully allowed to express all of its capabilities; not encumbered by what being of mixed lineage would have imposed upon its nature in France. Labeled in France as a misfit, Petite Sirah has solidly proven itself to be "The stuff that men are made of:" Durable, strength of intensity, and the ability to weather any challenge.

Although its grapes are petite, don't be fooled. This burly, manly wine has been able to completely express its concentration of color, flavors, textures, and tannins in ways that could only be imagined in its own homeland. The American Legend... Petite Sirah.

It takes true grit to get it, this Petite Sirah. It's not for fainting ladies. It's not for the White Zinfandel crowd. It's for the cowboy or cowgirl in all of us. Fasten up your spurs, Partnah; we're headed for a ride!

Did you know...

- Petite Sirah survived phylloxera.
- During Prohibition, it was Petite Sirah that was the wine being used as sacramental.
- It was the wine that home winemakers were being allowed to make and drink.
- It was the dried grapes that were being shipped back east as raisins (for reconstituting).
- And, it was the grape that Napa Valley was planted to by 60 percent in the 1960s.

Petite Sirah, Our All-American Legend!

