



As Seen On

The 30 Second Wine Advisor

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This Sirah's not so petite

For many wine enthusiasts, Petite Sirah is the Rodney Daingerfield of wine grapes, a variety that doesn't get any respect.

Perhaps it's the name - "Petite" being French for "small" - although curiously enough, this black, thick-skinned wine grape doesn't seem perceptibly undersize compared with other varieties.

Or maybe it's the conventional wisdom about Petite Sirah's European heritage as the French Durif, a relatively modern variety that's almost invariably described as "a lesser grape."

Then, too, Petite Sirah isn't a happy puppy of a grape, like, say, Zinfandel, that runs up and jumps up on you and yaps happily with jammy, fruit-bomb perfume. Dark, brooding and deep, Petite Sirah makes a wine that can seem forbiddingly monolithic and even simple in its youth, requiring plenty of airing and the right food match to come around; or better yet, a decade or maybe two in a good cellar.

But there's plenty to like about Petite Sirah, particularly if you like bold, full-bodied wines with lots of structure, the kind of drink that calls out for a big chunk of rare roast beef or an excellent steak. Add extra credit for a vinous heritage that places it right alongside Zinfandel as a classic California variety since the days when Grover Cleveland sat in the White House.

Dr. Francois Durif developed the new variety in 1880, crossing true Syrah with the old French grape Peloursin to yield a dark, tightly bunched variety that he named after himself. Within four years, it came to California, where it quickly picked up the name "Petite Sirah" to distinguish it from true Syrah, which had come to the New World a few years later.

You can enjoy the full story in an outstanding timeline by Louis M. Foppiano and commentary by the wine-grape scientist Dr. Carole Meredith, on the informative Website, "P.S. I Love You."

To make a long story short, though, Petite Sirah has never dominated the California wine scene but has remained an important niche player. Many of its plantings, and arguably the best, are ancient, dry-farmed vines, some of them in patches going back to the late 1800s.

In recent years, Dr. Meredith found through DNA studies that California's modern stock of vineyards identified as Petite Sirah are typically an odd "field blend" mix of Durif, Peloursin, true Syrah and a few unrelated vines including Zinfandel and Carignan. When individual vines identified as Petite Sirah are analyzed, however, 90 percent of them prove to be Durif and essentially all the rest are Peloursin.

If you're looking for an introduction to Petite Sirah, today's featured wine makes a good place to start. Concannon 2004 Central Coast Petite Sirah is typical, affordable (\$10.99 in my local market), and it enjoys a minor historical distinction all its own. Winery owner Jim Concannon traces his own family tree to his grandfather, James Concannon, who made Central wine starting in 1883, just as Petite Sirah was coming to the U.S.; and the modern Concannon winery lays claim to producing the first varietally labeled Petite Sirah in modern times, offering a non-vintage Livermore Valley Petite Sirah for sale in 1964.