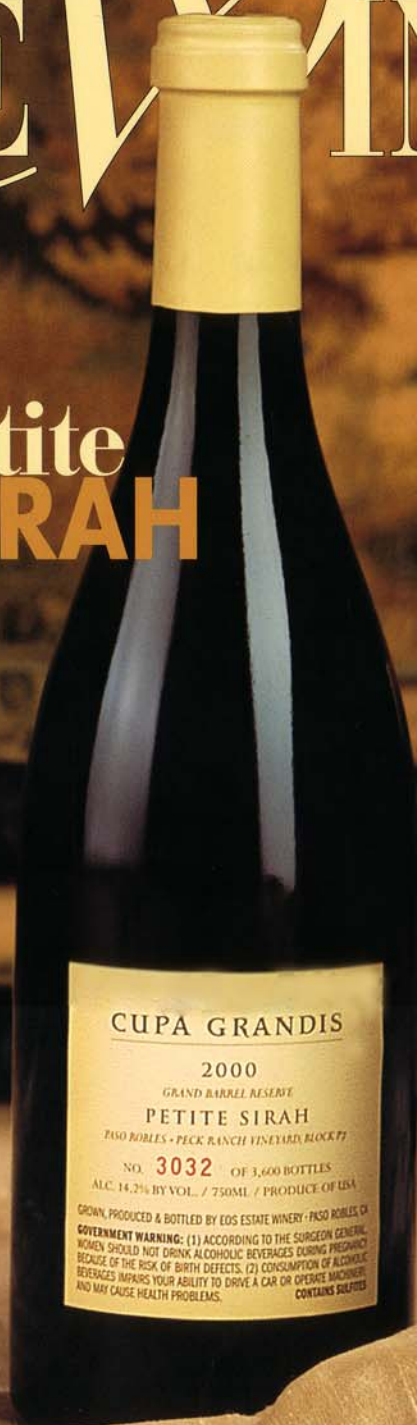


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petite
SIRAH





Sonoma County's Foppiano Vineyards is considered a Petite Sirah trailblazer, having showcased the "other" Rhône grape as a single varietal since the 1964 vintage.

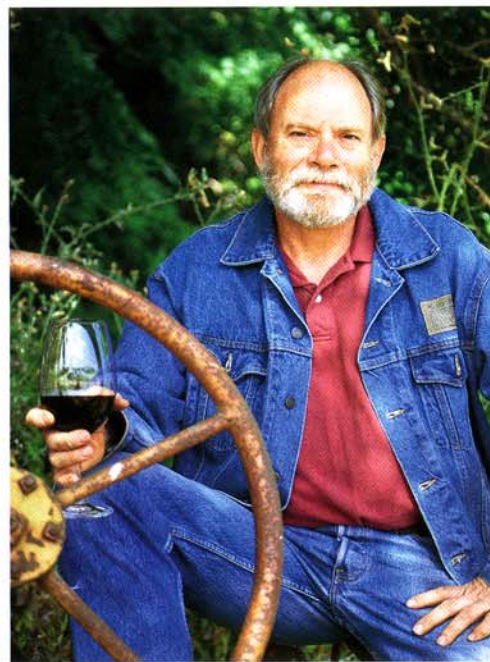
Opposite page: Advocate vintner Lou Foppiano Jr. asserts that petite sirah is a noble grape, citing plant geneticist Dr. Carole Meredith's research as proof.

JO DIAZ

petite SIRAH

loving the other Rhône

By STEVE PITCHER



JO DIAZ

Twenty-eight-two proved to be a watershed year for Petite Sirah, a wine with a long, but mostly undistinguished history in California. Things just seemed to fall nicely into place last year for the grape, saddled for decades with the reputation of being a robust, tannic, workhorse best suited for blending into a jug or bringing color and substance to weak-kneed Zinfandels, wimpy Cabernets and other structurally challenged reds. In 2002, Petite Sirah finally got some respect.

It turns out the grape has some nobility in its genes after all. No longer can commentators glibly state that petite sirah is not related in any way to syrah. The grape's got newfound class, and more than a handful of producers, including many of its longtime champions, are treating the wine differently in the cellar to create a more sophisticated style of varietal Petite Sirah, verging almost on the elegant.

Of course, Petite Sirah can't be an "elegant" single-varietal wine without lots of tinkering and a fair amount of blending, which dilutes its inherently generous, berry-like flavors, peppery spiciness and chewy tannins. It wants to be a hedonistic, lusty mouthful, but it can be made to behave itself. More or less.

People who love big red wine often have a passion for — one could even call it an obsession with — Petite Sirah, even with its incongruous name, because it certainly is not petite and it isn't quite syrah. There is, in fact, an enduring enthusiasm for "Pets," as winemakers often call these wines, which borders on fanaticism. According to winemaker David Jones of Lava Cap Winery in the Sierra Foothills, "We sell out of our limited-production Petite Sirah within a week of release. It's a cult item."

That observation is echoed throughout the northern California wine country by producers who include Petite Sirah in their portfolios. Ehren Jordan, winemaker at Turley Wine Cellars in St. Helena, which allocates bottles — rather than cases — of both its massively proportioned, vineyard-designated Zins and Petite "Syrahs" to a clamoring throng of buyers on its mailing list, says, "The Petites are always the first to sell out because the same people come back vintage after vintage wanting as much as they can get, even at \$38 and \$75 a bottle." Scarcity accounts for some of the appeal, as does critical acclaim, but hedonistically, the Turley Pets are so deeply fruited

and laden with peppery spice that they are show-stoppers whenever poured.

In nearby Calistoga, Greg Brown, the owner/winemaker at T-Vine Cellars, concurs: "I sell more of my Petite Sirah to my direct consumer list than my Zins and Grenache. These customers don't buy just one case of Petite, they buy five and six cases — as much as they can get." Brown is just as enthusiastic about the varietal as his customers — maybe more so. "From vintage to vintage, the absolute yummiest fruit I eat, while walking in the vineyards, is the good old humble, disrespected and a bit on the hillbilly side petite sirah in the Frediani Vineyard [near Calistoga]. I figure if it tastes so damn good in the vineyard, if it doesn't taste good in the bottle it's my fault."

This unbridled enthusiasm, albeit confined to a relatively small but growing segment of wine lovers, took wing last year when petite sirah's true identity in California's vineyards was confirmed and the grape's parentage was fully and convincingly disclosed. That, in turn, led to the acceptance of petite sirah as a bona fide Rhône variety by The Rhone Rangers, an organization of more than 150 American wineries and growers whose goal is to increase the public's awareness of Rhône-style wines. Since its inception in 1997, the group shunned petite sirah (as well as the circumflex, the French accent over the "o" in Rhône), going so far as to officially banish the varietal from its huge public tastings.

And capping the year's whirlwind of pro-Petite developments was the wine industry's "First Annual Petite Sirah Noble Symposium," held last August in Healdsburg. The ambitious, day-long affair, hosted by Foppiano Vineyards, gathered together some five dozen growers, winemakers, scientists and journalists who enthusiastically looked into myriad aspects of the pedigree, growing, vinification and marketing of petite sirah. >

Chief among the expert witnesses was Dr. Carole Meredith, whose seminal work as a plant geneticist over several years in the Department of Viticulture and Enology at UC-Davis had, by 1998, conclusively established not only petite sirah's true identity but the grape's parentage as well.

That the durif grape from France's Rhône Valley is petite sirah has been widely known in the California wine industry since at least the mid-1970s, after French ampelographers Pierre Galet and Paul Truel examined various California plantings and positively identified them as durif. But there was lingering confusion, which Dr. Meredith sought to dispel during the seminar.

"When we did our DNA work on petite sirah one of the things that came out was, that of all the vines we tested, not all turned out to be durif. Some people have taken that to mean that petite sirah is sometimes durif and sometimes it's not durif. Well, I contend that petite sirah is always durif, and the reason that some of the vines we tested were not durif was because we were looking at old vineyards.

"Old red vineyards are mixtures. You sometimes find as many as ten varieties in there. But the same thing happens if you go into an old zinfandel vineyard, or even an old cabernet vineyard. You will find a lot of other varieties. So, everything that looked like petite sirah that we sampled was durif. We don't need to worry that not all petite sirah is durif, because I would say that petite sirah is durif, no questions asked. It's a synonym just like shiraz and syrah," she asserted.

Now that everyone is quite literally on the same page, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms announced in 2002 that it was considering whether or not to allow Durif to be used as a synonym for Petite Sirah on wine labels. It will be up to that agency's successor, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, to make the final decision. Dr. Meredith cautions, however, that while petite sirah and durif are the same grape, "I believe that [permitting durif as a synonym] would only cause further confusion, and it's confusing enough already with people trying to figure out whether or not petite sirah and syrah, not to mention shiraz, are related."

Even if Durif ends up on labels in place of Petite Sirah, wineries should think twice before availing themselves of the option. "Pass the Durif" doesn't have quite the charm or alliteration of "Pass the Pet, please."

But wait, there's more. "Petite-Sirah (Syrah): A grape planted in California, and yielding a fairly good red wine. It is also known as the Duriff [*sic*]. Some authorities say that this grape descends from the Syrah from which French Hermitage is made. Others maintain that it is not." Such was the entire treatment accorded to the variety in Alexis Lichine's *Encyclopedia of Wine and Spirits* published in 1970. Four years later, Lichine's *New Encyclopedia of Wine and Spirits*, a revised, enlarged and updated version of the classic reference, repeated the entry word for word — including the extra "f" — and not one word

Robert Brittan, winemaker
at Stags' Leap Winery,
distinguishes his flagship
Petite "Syrah" as "a more
delicate wine than its
deep color or flavor
intensity would imply."

Opposite page: Few petite
plantings have achieved
the reputation enjoyed
by the legendary
estate vineyard at Stags'
Leap Winery.



more, yet it contained a germ of truth.

The grape we've always called petite sirah was discovered around 1880 by Dr. François Durif, a French nurseryman working at the University of Montpellier in the south of France. (Wine writer Fred McMillin unearthed Dr. Durif's first name, which was initially mentioned in *The Wines of California, the Pacific Northwest, and New York* by Roy Andries de Groot. Published in 1982, it referred to Dr. Durif as an "amateur botanist," and noted that in almost all American reference books of the time, the name is wrongly spelled as "Duriff.")

Dr. Durif, who propagated grape clones for the wine industry, noticed that a new vine had been created quite fortuitously in his experimental vineyard as the result of the crossing of two grape varieties in his care. He named the grape after himself and, observing that it demonstrated resistance to downy mildew (also called oidium), proceeded to market it as a godsend to growers vexed by the fungal disease then causing widespread damage to European vineyards.

While durif may have been mildew resistant, it never impressed the French with the wine it yielded, which accounts for the fact that today it is virtually nonexistent in France, hanging on in limited plantings in the Isère and Ardèche regions of the Rhône Valley and in Palette, a tiny appellation in Provence. Durif also had a propensity to develop grey rot during the late summer rains and humid growing season in the Rhône, costing it popularity among growers. It would do much better after it immigrated to California, with its mostly dry, rain-free growing season.

In his 1998 book, *A Companion to California Wine*, eminent historian Charles Sullivan discloses that true syrah first appeared in J. H. Drummond's Sonoma Valley Dunfillan Winery vineyard in 1878 as an

import from France, where some *vignerons* distinguished between a low-yielding, superior-quality, small-berry version they called "petite syrah," and a version referred to as "gross syrah" (which isn't syrah at all, but rather a synonym for the inferior mondeuse noir grape), a vigorous varietal with bigger berries that makes so-so "Syrah." It was petite syrah that was planted in California and came to be called by that name as well as syrah, and by the 1890s some Napa Valley vintners were labeling wines made from the variety as "Hermitage." While the wines were popular with the public and critics, the grape ultimately failed to impress growers because of its uneconomical low yields.

True syrah suffered its *coup de grâce* in the mid-1890s, when phylloxera wiped out virtually all of the plantings of the variety in California. Sullivan indicates that after 1897, "when good times brought vast planting and replanting all over the state, something called petite sirah became a popular variety. It was not syrah and was probably durif," which the trade touted for its color, fragrance and high yield. By 1900, petite sirah, zinfandel and mourvèdre were the three most widely planted wine grapes in California.

Syrah was thus eclipsed by its offspring, and after 1915, Sullivan noted, "We hear almost nothing of the real syrah in California." That absence was to last until 1959, when Christian Brothers planted a four-acre test block of syrah in the Napa Valley. Joseph Phelps Vineyards' winemaker Walter Schug made the first modern-day California Syrah from Brother Timothy's grapes in 1975, while waiting for the winery's own syrah vines to mature. The first Joseph Phelps estate Syrah (vintage 1976) was released in 1978 and has the distinction of being the product of the first commercial planting of syrah in the state since the 19th century.



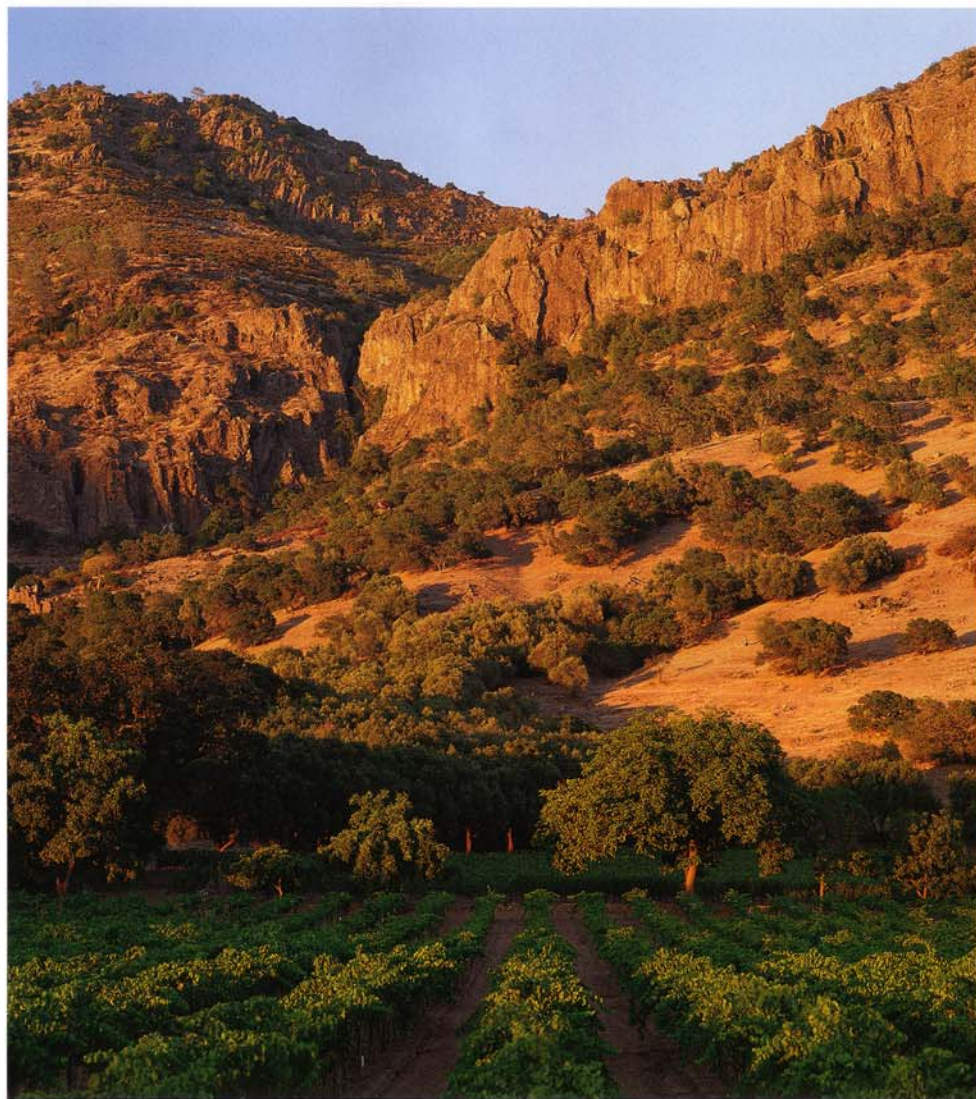
PHOTOS: JIM BLOCK

Throughout those years, interrupted only by Prohibition, petite sirah enjoyed enormous success in California, primarily as a mainstay component of the popular "Burgundy" red wine blends made by top wine houses such as Inglenook and Beaulieu in the Napa Valley, and Concannon in the Livermore Valley. Petite's usual blending partners were grenache, béclan, carignane and mataro (mourvèdre), and sometimes zinfandel as well.

Concannon would become the first winery to release a varietal Petite Sirah; its 1961 Livermore Valley Petite Sirah bottling hit retail shelves in 1964. A couple of months later, Lee Stewart's 1961 Napa Valley Petite Sirah, under the Souverain Cellars label, was similarly offered. Following these trailblazers, other wineries began bottling varietal Petite Sirah, notably Foppiano with its 1964 vintage Pet. As a result, during the 1960s and early 1970s Petite Sirah enjoyed some moderate success as a varietal wine, attaining almost cult status.

By the mid-1970s, there were about 13,000 acres of petite sirah planted in California (remarkably, petite sirah was the dominant grape in the Napa Valley until 1970). But through the late 1970s and '80s, Petite Sirah gradually fell out of favor as more so-called sophisticated varietals proliferated, and many growers uprooted old petite vines in favor of trendier grapes such as cabernet sauvignon. By the early 1990s, petite acreage had shrunk to about 1,600 acres statewide.

Figures for 2002 show a resurgence for the variety, with about 4,400 acres (3,260 bearing/1,140 nonbearing), of which about 1,560 acres were planted between 1997 and 2002 in the premium North Coast appellations of Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino, as well as Central Coast appellations like Paso Robles and San Luis Obispo. Limited acreage accounts for the fact that many of the best



OLAF BECKMANN

Pets on today's market are tiny-production wines and priced accordingly.

Sullivan further records that in 1884, six years after syrah was first brought into northern California, Charles McIver (owner of Linda Vista Winery near San Jose) imported Dr. Durif's newly propagated eponymous grape for his vineyard and for sale to other growers, dubbing his durif "petite sirah." No explanation has surfaced as to why McIver settled on this coined name, although it is probable that he wanted to make the Rhône connection for commercial purposes because the name "durif" gives no hint of its region of origin. Because "petite syrah" was already being used, McIver got as close as he could with "petite sirah." Dr. Meredith noted that French ampelographer Claude Valat observed in 1996 that in parts of the Rhône Valley, durif has also been called petite syrah — so named "petite" apparently because the plants are weak.

The fact that the French have also used the term "petite syrah" for the superior form of syrah that grows in Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie may help explain why some of today's varietal bottlings of

Petite Sirah are confusingly labeled "Petite Syrah" by California wineries such as Stags' Leap Winery, Turley Wine Cellars, David Bruce Winery and Fife Vineyards. Drinkers should feel confident, however, that the same grape is used for the wine, whether the label says Petite Sirah or "Petite Syrah."

Veteran winemaker David Bruce has been making Pets from durif for more than three decades and currently markets two Petite "Syrahs" from Central Coast vineyards. He settled on this spelling way back in 1968. "I saw a UC-Davis professor and told him I wanted to make a Hermitage wine," Bruce recalls. "He told me the syrah grape was probably the same as petite sirah. So it made sense to use the "y" instead of the "i" in the spelling."

But why stick with this aberration now? The research of Dr. Meredith and her colleagues has conclusively demonstrated that durif is a cross of an obscure southern French grape called peloursin and true syrah, the noble variety that is the basis for the great Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie wines of the Rhône Valley. "Peloursin is the mother and syrah is the father," Dr. Meredith explained, "which means that



SCOTT BROWN DESIGN

T-Vine Cellars effusive owner-winemaker Greg Brown says if the fruit he gets from the Frediani Vineyard doesn't taste good in the bottle, it's his fault. He must be getting it right though, because his limited-release Petite earned 93 points from the author.

petite sirah is the legitimate offspring of syrah. That means that half of the genetic makeup of petite sirah came directly from syrah. They are two distinct varieties, but they're as closely related as two varieties can be." Syrah brought nobility into the durif marriage; peloursin brought little more than resistance to powdery mildew.

Significantly, chance cross-pollination has played a part in the creation of other, highly prized wine grapes. The host at last summer's symposium, Lou Foppiano, Jr., observed pointedly that, "There's been too much controversy over this grape [petite sirah]. If cabernet franc can be [crossed] with sauvignon blanc and called cabernet sauvignon, a noble grape, and pinot blanc and gouais blanc can be [crossed] and called chardonnay, another noble grape, it's high time to respect Dr. Meredith's proven DNA results: namely that petite sirah was [a cross] of syrah and peloursin, and is, in fact, a noble grape."

More than 100 wineries currently produce one or more Petite Sirahs, including several high-end houses better known for other wines, such as Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Signorello Vineyards and PlumpJack Winery, each of which makes a tiny amount of expensive Petite in choice vintages for sale only at the winery door. At least a dozen producers have gained particular renown for their Pets, including some, such as Foppiano Vineyards, Stag's Leap Winery and Concannon Vineyards, that consider Petite Sirah their flagship varietal.

Dr. Meredith's Pet research eventually had an impact on the stubborn Rhone Rangers, which since its founding had limited wines approved for pouring at the organization's tastings to those made from grape varieties approved by the French l'Institut

National des Appellations d'Origine for the Côtes-du-Rhône appellation. Neither petite sirah nor durif was on the list, and many members viewed the grape with outright disdain.

Mendocino winegrower and proprietor of McDowell Valley Vineyards, Bill Crawford, the current president of The Rhone Rangers, recalls that after the Meredith's research was published, members who made both Syrah and Petite Sirah began agitating to include the latter as an approved Rhône grape variety. "The fact that [petite sirah] also has a distinct heritage from the Rhône Valley, as proved by Dr. Meredith, made it an issue that had to be revisited," Crawford explained. "I took the initiative at the April 2002 board meeting to propose a resolution to include petite sirah/durif as an approved variety. After some parliamentary skirmishing, the resolution was approved by a vote of 12 to 2." And after submission of the resolution to the entire membership, petite sirah was included as a Rhone Rangers' variety with fewer than ten nays among the 140 voting members.

"The purpose of The Rhone Rangers is to educate consumers about Rhône wines, and progress in education comes through inclusion rather than exclusion," Crawford elaborates. "I can't tell you how many times at our public tastings, when I'd ask a visitor if they'd like to taste our Syrah, the response would be, 'Oh, I love Petite Sirah, is that the same thing?'" By pouring both wines, Crawford can now handily illustrate the distinction. Not only that, he says many of the producers who make both a Syrah and a Petite wouldn't join the Rangers until they could pour both wines at its public tastings.

Fife Vineyards' owner Dennis Fife sees a real

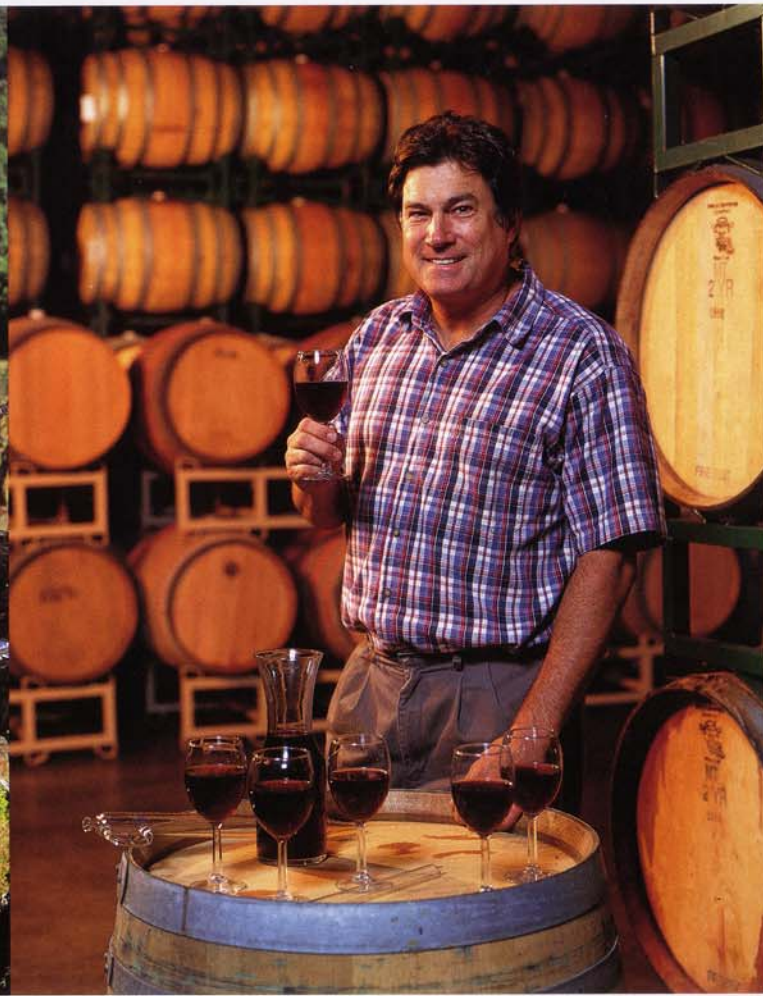
benefit in comparison tasting. "Many of us who make both Syrah and Petite Sirah find that the fans of our Petite Sirah are the same customers who avidly buy our Syrah," he says, adding that press, trade and consumers alike want to taste them side by side. "They find this educational and fun," he explains. "They love the idea that America has its own Rhône variety, and they want to see in what way the two wines taste different. If one is a Petite Sirah fan, it's natural to want to try Syrah, and vice versa. In this way, association with Petite Sirah has long attracted consumers to Syrah, and other Rhône wines as well."

But the taste profiles for Petite Sirah and Syrah certainly differ in significant respects, with most Pet winemakers describing Petite Sirah as having a noticeable black pepper aroma and taste. Syrah, on the other hand, leans more toward the berry spectrum, although there's plenty of blackberry fruit in Petite Sirah as well. "Syrah is more spice and ripe berries, like a berry-type Zinfandel," says Bill Regan, winemaker at Foppiano Vineyards. "Our Petites typically show currants and black pepper spice in the nose, and rich, jammy fruit flavors." Veteran Mendocino winemaker Dennis Patton, who consults for several wineries, observes that "Syrahs are fleshier, rounder, with spicy, high-toned aromatics, while Petite Sirahs are bigger, bolder, with a distinctive cracked pepper character."

Robert Brittan, winemaker at Stag's Leap Winery, concedes that the flavor profile of Syrah is difficult to define. "When done well, Syrahs are more forward, with violets and sometimes a gamy note, but then they can be hard and short in the finish," he says. Brittan distinguishes his flagship Petite Syrah as "a more delicate wine than its deep color or flavor intensity would imply, giving off big aromas of blackberry, mocha and forest floor, and similar flavors that have a blackberry syrup kind of richness, heavier and denser flavors than Syrah. I also find that Petite Sirah has a longer finish than Syrah."

Turley Wine Cellars' Jordan, quoted in the *Petite Report* (a semi-annual newsletter published by Foppiano Vineyards), says that Petite Sirah tastes more like Syrah than many California Syrahs. "In California, Petite is more Rhône-like than the vast majority of Syrahs that are made here. In fact, when I show our Petite to winemakers from the Rhône, the first thing they want to know is where they can get vines to plant."

Fife similarly contends that Syrah and Petite Sirah can be so close in flavor and texture that even experts have a difficult time telling them apart — and the better the wine, the more this is true. "We have a wonderful Napa Valley vineyard with alluvial soils with lots of rocks, in which we have young syrah planted in 1990 next to petite sirah planted in the 1950s. Our most successful wine, Max Cuvée, is made from a blend of these two blocks," he explains. "We find that from one vintage to the next, we have wide swings in the blend depending on the quality and character of each block in a given year. From time to time, we also make a barrel or so of the Syrah



Left: McDowell Family Vineyards' Bill Crawford, current president of The Rhone Rangers, successfully agitated to include the varietal in the group's tasting events. *Right & opposite page:* For his Cupa Grandis Barrel Reserve Petite Sirah, which the author awarded 96 points, EOS winemaker Steve Felten insists on aging it in nothing other than new Mercier barrels.

and one of the Petite Sirah from this vineyard just to better understand the components of Max Cuvée. When made identically and aged in top Burgundian barrels, the more elegant, longer-finished wine more often than not is the Petite Sirah."

Fife typically conducts blind tastings of California's top Syrahs and Petite Sirahs every few months. "Our guests are all quite knowledgeable—all in the wine business and about half are Syrah winemakers," he explains. "We have yet to have a tasting where it was possible to separate the Syrahs from the Petite Sirahs with any confidence. And often, no one identifies them all correctly. Great wines from these two varieties are separated mostly by winemaking style and *terroir*. Petite Sirah tends to be pretty dense, but so are many top Syrahs—and so are many of our favorite wines from the Côte-Rôtie."

An important thing to keep in mind, amidst all these distinctions, is that the differences in taste and character between Syrah and Sirah are often more about preconceived notions than what's in the glass. Those who in the past have been exposed to the "rustic" style of Petite Sirah, with its sturdy, palate-drying tannins and brooding black fruit, may be

excused for expecting the same from newer versions of the wine. The fact is, the rustic style no longer exclusively defines the varietal, and the time is ripe to become reacquainted with the wine.

Yet learning to love or even appreciate Petites requires a commitment more demanding than cultivating a relationship with pushover varietals such as Merlot or Chardonnay. Indeed, the principal reason why some wine lovers may have found Petite Sirah a disagreeable taste experience is that they didn't drink it under ideal conditions. Unlike most other California red wines, Petite Sirah requires—nay, demands—decanting and extensive breathing time before the wine can be fully and properly enjoyed. This is true whether the wine is young and full of intensity, or older and still sleepy and semiconscious after a long hibernation.

Because Petites are some of the longest-lived of California's red wines, smoothing out their tannins and taking on a mellowness with 10, 15 or 20 years in the cellar, they make a savvy choice as a gift for a child who will turn 21 a generation from now. As for the jaded collector who insists that Petite Sirah may mellow with age, but not gain much complexity, it's simply because the wine hasn't been given sufficient

time to open up and truly show its worth.

Patience is required when it comes to enjoying Petite Sirah because the variety makes for big, assertive red wines. Powerful tannins and a dark, almost black color are characteristics that the diehard fan of the traditional Petite Sirah style seeks. The wine's fruit flavors of rich berry and boysenberry jam are enhanced by spicy notes of pepper, nutmeg and clove.

Depending on the winemaking technique, Petites can be either quite bold and assertive, or more user friendly. Today one can find Petite Sirah in both the older, rustic version and in the newer, softer version. Fife notes that Petite Sirahs are improving rapidly, thanks to more sophisticated winemaking equipment and a greater knowledge of how to handle the grape in the winery for optimum results. "We now have the means to significantly reduce harsh tannins and bitterness, and at the same time bring out Petite Sirah's great fruit," he says.

"In the vineyard, it's important to pick petite when the seeds are ripe," he cautions. In the winery, he avoids breaking the seeds in the winemaking process, because the seeds are a source of tannin. "We use an automatic punch-down device in the

fermentation tank that is very gentle. The object is to gently submerge the cap (the layer of grape solids that floats on the surface of the liquid during fermentation) in order to extract color, flavor and some tannin. We don't want to beat up the cap."

While Fife punches down like many, others pump over. Foppiano's Regan manages tannins by using an irrigation device for pumping over that gently sprinkles the fermenting juice over the cap without breaking it up. "This method provides abundant, but softer, tannins," Regan notes.

At York Creek, near the top of Napa's Spring Mountain, a scattering of 90-year-old, pre-Prohibition vines owned by Fritz Maytag survive. These produce fine Petite Sirahs with wonderful structure and a solid core of blackberry fruit, layered with mineral and black pepper, earth and rose petal. Although appealing when young, they become softer and more complex with more bottle age. Ridge Vineyards' legendary Paul Draper buys the fruit for his vineyard-designated York Creek Petite Sirah and takes yet another taming tack: "To achieve balanced tannins in our York Creek Petite Sirah, a quarter of the grapes in the fermentation tank are left uncrushed as whole clusters without destemming, for their fresh fruit," he explains. "The rest are destemmed and fully crushed for color. The use of uncrushed whole clusters buffers the grape seeds in the clusters."

Alternately, one can ameliorate Petite's firm, chewy tannins, as does Stags' Leap's Brittan, by blending petite sirah with one or more varieties that will soften it. "I customarily blend in varietals in the Côte-Rôtie tradition, each of which is aged separately in oak barrels, about a third of which are new," Brittan explains. "After 18 months, the components are blended. Our Petite Syrah, which is predominantly varietal, is enhanced with about 15 percent syrah, three percent carignane and one percent grenache for complexity, and softened with about two percent viognier, a white Rhône varietal.

"From the outset," Brittan continues, "the grapes that become a part of this wine are handled with extreme care — handpicked, transported the short distance to the winery in small bins and fermented in small batches at moderately warm temperatures. I want to extract enough tannin to give the wine structure, but I don't want to overdo it; if the skins aren't removed at just the right time, a monster can easily emerge."

Extended maceration will also mellow a Petite's tannic bite. Mike Officer, the winemaker at Carlisle Winery, explains that "The fruit for our 2001 Dry Creek Valley Petite Sirah was picked on October 7th, and the must was cold-soaked for five days before inoculation with a yeast strain known for contributing to smooth mouth-feel." Once fermentation was complete, he continues, "the wine was left to macerate on the skins for several more weeks — a total of 40 days on the skins — another technique for enhancing mouth-feel." According to Officer, extended maceration causes the tannin



molecules to bind together, leaving fewer "sharp edges" in the molecular chain to cause that gritty feeling on the palate.

Lavishing the very finest winemaking ingredients on petite sirah does, indeed, produce spectacular results, as demonstrated by the pinnacle of a trio of Pets from the up-and-coming EOS Estate Winery in Paso Robles (one is made under the Novella label). It is no coincidence that Petite Sirah is wine director Steve Felten's favorite varietal, and the winery indulges his passion by investing in an ongoing supply of new Mercier barrels, made from oak sourced from specific forests in France — Tronçais, Allier and Vosges — targeted and selected by Felten. "Founded in 1960, Françoise Mercier originally crafted barrels for brandy producers in Cognac, where the cooperage is located," Felten notes. "Because the barrel contributes a majority of the flavors to distilled spirits, the refined and elegant Mercier style was quickly adopted by red wine producers in Bordeaux, and is now popular with top producers world-wide." For his Cupa Grandis Barrel Reserve Petite Sirah, Felten uses the heavy-toasted

version of those barrels to enhance the black fruit and spice offered by the varietal.

EOS has almost 88 acres of estate and contracted petite sirah, and from this wealth of fruit Felten focuses on one block of 45-year-old, head-pruned vines from the Peck Ranch east of Paso Robles for his spare-no-expense Cupa Grandis (the name is Latin for "grand barrel") bottling. "Twenty-four months of barrel aging in 67 percent new Mercier oak maximized bouquet development and softened the texture," Felten says.

Superbly packaged in individually numbered bottles, the premier release of the EOS Estate 2000 Cupa Grandis Petite Sirah is unquestionably the leader of the pack of current-release California Petite Sirahs, offering unbelievable depth of fruit coupled with exquisite balance and finesse. Most California Syrahs pale by comparison.

While a growing number of Pets are now made in a less-tannic style than many of the bruisers of the past, the wine has yet to make notable inroads on restaurant wine lists. Sommeliers cite public perception of Petite Sirah as brazenly tannic as the

DECANTING the intricacies of Petite Sirah

To fully enjoy the intricacies of Petite Sirah, consider investing a little more time in its discovery. The ritual of "double-double" decanting will reward even the most skeptical wine snob.

For more venerable Petites, stand the bottle upright for several days. Check for sediment and, if present, carefully pour all but the last half ounce into a decanter. Allow for about an hour's breathing time. Discard the tail and rinse the bottle with fresh water; drain well.

Now decant back into the clean bottle, then gush the wine back into the decanter. Finally, decant back into the bottle, and allow the wine to breathe uncorked for at least one hour and up to six hours.

If the wine is young and

without sediment, simply extract the cork and plug the wine straight into the decanter, aerating it as much as possible in the process. Go ahead and swirl and slosh it around a bit, too. After thus jump-starting your Pet, walk away and don't even think of sipping its contents for about an hour — longer if you can keep your hands off the beckoning black liquid fairly pulsating with vitality and filling the room with heady aromas of black pepper and blackberry jam. If bottle presentation is preferred, decant back into the bottle before serving.

Winery reps pouring Petites at public tastings should also decant their offerings, primarily because the ritual allows the wine to be both more expressive and impressive.

When giving Petite Sirah as a gift (or selling it in a tasting room) consider pairing the bottle with a clear glass or crystal decanter along with brief instructions for proper decanting. A friend or customer who may never have considered buying a decanter will then have one to use time and again for Pets and other more demanding reds.

If the occasion warrants an even more extravagant gift, include one or more of the Riedel glasses specifically designed to best showcase New World Syrah and Shiraz — either Vinum Series No. 416/30 or Wine Series No. 448/30. Both work exquisitely well for Petite Sirah, which is now, of course, a full-fledged, acknowledged Rhône wine, too. — SP

reason for excluding the varietal from their lists. Master Sommelier Larry Stone, a partner in San Francisco's posh *Rubicon Restaurant*, admits to having one, maybe two, "cult" Petites on his extensive wine list, but notes resignedly that they just don't sell. "I have several vintages of the Turley Wine Cellars Petite Syrah now; they just accumulate from year to year, even though I price the wine close to the retail price. I get the Petite as part of the tight allocation of Turley's Zins, which I have no trouble selling."

Restaurants specializing in hearty and highly seasoned cuisine, such as blackened tuna or spice-rubbed meats, are probably a more appropriate venue for Pets anyway. But the best place for them is the home wine cellar, where they can be dusted off to serve with lavishly seasoned barbecued meats.

Carl Doumani, who owns Quixote Winery in Napa Valley, and whose love affair with Petite Sirah was fanned years ago when he owned next-door-neighbor Stags' Leap Winery, summed up the culinary discussion at last August's inaugural symposium by declaring in a booming baritone, "Petite is all about abundant flavor. This is not your afternoon porch wine. This is a wine I like to drink with barbecued lamb — not roasted lamb. The berry in the fruit makes it go well with all kinds of food. Duck or game in a marinade. It's even great with Szechuan!"

Petite Sirah belongs in the hands of epicures, such as Doumani, who enjoy expressive, robust, hearty foods that cry out for a wine with the stuffing to match such dishes stride-for-stride.

T-Vine's Greg Brown, a precocious Pet practitioner with far fewer years of experience with the varietal than Doumani, exudes every bit as much enthusiasm for America's own Rhône variety. He links passion to precision winemaking, "hence, my goal of making Petite Sirah with some R-E-S-P-E-C-T, and I don't mean just a little bit," he insists. "As for seeking out the wine, I say if you're content with coloring inside the lines, then keep only Cab and Chard in your cellar, and the rest of us rebels will jump off bridges, travel without reservations and drink Petite Sirah." ☞

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PETsite

The theme of the First Annual Petite Sirah Noble Symposium, "P.S. I Love You," was coined by critic Dan Berger, who also served as a panel moderator. This clever title is now also the Web site address (www.psiloveyou.org) where the curious will find useful information, including Dr. Carole Meredith's 1999 research paper on "The Identity and Parentage of the Variety Known in California as Petite Sirah," links to charter member wineries, Pet-friendly recipes and other resources of interest. — SP



JO DIAZ

Five dozen growers, winemakers, scientists and journalists attended the inaugural "PS I Love You" symposium held last August at Foppiano Vineyards in Healdsburg, California, (including the author, seated in the second row, fourth from left).

tasting BAR

All the wines that follow were double-double decanted (see instructions in the "Decanting" box that appears on page 38) and tasted blind over several days. Listings are divided into two Petite styles: "Refined" and "Rustic."

Refined Pets

Vincent Arroyo, 1999 Petite Sirah, Rattlesnake Acres, Napa Valley — \$50 (15.5% alc./47 cases): Smells warm and inviting, like a trayful of freshly baked brownies topped with crushed wild blackberries and a dusting of white pepper. On the palate there's a cascade of ripe blackberry fruit accented with mocha and cocoa; medium-full tannins are ripe and evident. Dark plum emerges in the long finish. *Score: 90*

Bear Creek, 2000 Petite Sirah, Lodi — \$19 (14.5% alc./750 cases): Spicy American oak scents with slow-to-evolve berry fruit aromas. Generous, round and rich with loads of blackberry fruit; medium tannins. *Score: 89*

Robert Biale, 2000 Petite Sirah, Old Crane Ranch, Napa Valley — \$50 (14.6% alc./50 cases): Nose of loamy earth, bramble, crushed dried roses and dark berry fruit; dark chocolate scents emerge with airing. Ultrasmooth, luscious and juicy with slightly muted flavors of blackberry and dried herbs; peppery spice enhances the finish. *Score: 90*

Robert Biale, 2000 Petite Sirah, Thomann Station, Napa Valley — \$40 (15.0% alc./400 cases): Forward, gloriously fruity nose of freshly crushed ripe black raspberry. Velvety and smooth with supple tannins, this opulent Pet is brimming with deep, rich, jammy berry fruit. A joy to drink. *Score: 92*

Bogle, 2001 Petite Sirah, California — \$10 (13.5% alc./75,000 cases): Complex nose of old leather, dried savory, plum compote, blackberry and boysenberry with undertones of blueberry. Almost liqueur-like in its richness with ripe, medium tannins. Smooth and very easy to drink with juicy, jammy blackberry and vanillin oak qualities and a long, white pepper-tinged finish. Bogle's flagship wine. *Best Value / Score: 90*

David Bruce, 2000 Petite Syrah, Shell Creek Vineyard, Paso Robles — \$25 (13.5% alc./907 cases): Attractive, inviting aromas of cherry and cassis. Characteristically opulent Paso fruit makes this Pet a joy to drink with well-managed tannins and copious blueberry-cherry fruit accented by dried savory. Its velvety texture makes for a wine that is both powerful and refined. *Score: 89*

Carlisle, 2001 Petite Sirah, Dry Creek Valley — \$36 (16.6% alc./54 cases): A black, glass-staining wine offering inviting aromas of ripe black raspberry, blueberry, pie crust and loamy earth. Luscious, round and smooth on the palate, like blueberry syrup, this unfined and unfiltered Pet fairly dances

on the palate with fine acid balance, delivering loads of ripe, peppery, black raspberry-cassis fruit and medium tannins; finishes long with a hint of vanilla. *Score: 92*

Castoro, 1999 Petite Sirah, Paso Robles — \$16 (13.9% alc./404 cases): Red meat, red berry-currant and warm spice aromas are replicated on the palate of this Rhône-like red; medium-full tannins are supple, ripe and well behaved. *Score: 91*

Clayton, 1999 Petite Sirah, Estate Vineyard Old Vine Block SC, Lodi — \$29 (14.8% alc./800 cases): Retentive bouquet of vanillin oak, brown spice, berry fruit and a wisp of raisin. Surprisingly explosive in the mouth with oodles of spicy berry fruit tinged with brown sugar, this big, but well-behaved Petite is round, smooth and quite expressive, verging on late-harvest ripeness; ripe, supple tannins. *Score: 88*

Concannon, 1999 Petite Sirah Reserve, San Francisco Bay — \$25 (14.4% alc./4,971 cases): Meaty scents mingle with ripe berry fruit on the nose. Rich and juicy in the mouth with a surprisingly silky texture and medium tannins. *Score: 90*

Cosentino, 2001 Petite Sirah, Knoll Family Vineyard, Lodi — \$25 (14.5% alc./444 cases): Cosentino's first commercial bottling of Petite hits a home run with appealing, Rhône-like aromas of roasted meat with pan drippings, black fruit and a cilantro herbaceousness tinged with a hint of leathery Petite funk. Hugely structured, yet finely

balanced with medium tannins, this vineyard-designate is rich and luscious, offering layers of exotic flavors — plummy blackberry-black cherry fruit, tobacco leaf, pepper and red meat; quite mouth-filling. An exuberant, well-crafted Petite that will appeal to many palates. *Score: 93*

EOS Estate, 2000 Petite Sirah "Cupa Grandis," Grand Barrel Reserve, Peck Ranch Vineyard, Block P7, Paso Robles — \$40 (14.2% alc./300 cases): This benchmark Petite is among the finest expressions of the varietal I've ever encountered. Produced from a block of 45-year-old, head-pruned vines and aged in 67 percent new, heavily toasted Mercier barrels for 24 months, the premier release of the Cupa Grandis offers forward, intensely complex, highly appealing aromas of ripe blackberry-cherry-cassis fruit, chocolate, cinnamon and black pepper, cookie dough and toast. Enormously rich and concentrated, yet smooth as velvet, resembling Kirsch, the wine's flavors replicate the nose, showing a solid core of black fruit and peppery spice, leading to a long finish of roasted coffee bean and baked berry. The fruit plays on the palate like a pull-out-all-the-stops pipe organ flooding a cathedral with the harmonics of a Bach *toccata* — rich and resonant. A noble and generous 100 percent varietal Petite that exhibits fine balance for all that weight. *Score: 96*

EOS Estate, 2000 Petite Sirah Reserve, Paso Robles — \$25 (13.7% alc./16,300 cases): Spicy aromas of blackberry, black cherry and crushed black peppercorn; notes of plum, anise and cocoa emerge with additional airing. Full bodied, supple and exceedingly rich, this juicy Pet delivers deep, intense, flavors of dark berries and mocha with firm but ripe tannins. *Score: 90*

Fife, 2000 Petite Syrah, Mendocino — \$20 (13.5% alc./920 cases): Forward aromas of brambly blackberry and toasty oak; generous berry fruit that's deep and nicely concentrated. Well crafted with ripe, melt-in-your-mouth tannins. *Score: 88*

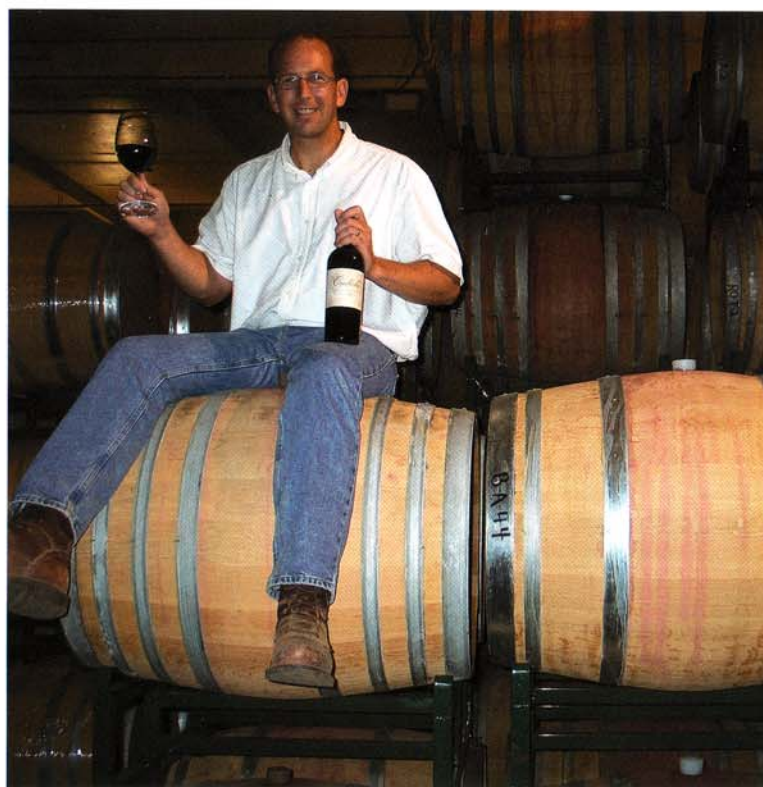
Fife, 2000 Petite Syrah, Redhead Vineyard, Redwood Valley — \$24 (13.9% alc./920 cases): Complex, appealing scents of topsoil, blueberry and black raspberry fruit, a whisp of white pepper and a hint of leathery Petite funk. Densely flavored and lavishly rich showcasing ripe blackberry and black cherry-cassis fruit with chewy, medium-full tannins. A Petite that's been tamed but not broken. *Score: 90*

Foppiano, 2001 Petite Sirah, Paso Robles — \$14 (14.2% alc./2,500 cases): Nose leads with black pepper and leather followed by black fruit and red meat undertones. Enormously rich and concentrated offering opulent blackberry extract, this impressive Petite is mouth-filling, round and smooth with medium-full tannins. *Best Value / Score: 91*

Foppiano, 2001 Petite Sirah, Bacigalupi Vineyard, Russian River Valley — \$17 (14.0% alc./860 cases): Fragrant, appealing nose emitting the tang of American oak, sour cherry-dark berry fruit, clove spice and dried herbs. Similar flavors are bright and

Mike Officer, the winemaker at Carlisle Winery, believes that putting petite sirah through extended maceration causes the tannin molecules to bind together, leaving fewer "sharp edges" in the resulting wine.

Opposite page: From nose to palate, the author says Carlisle's 2001 Dry Creek Valley Pet is a veritable blueberry patch.



deep, enhanced by nuances of strawberry and white pepper; smooth, syrup-like texture and medium tannins. A complex, seductive wine. *Score: 90*

Frey, 2000 Petite Sirah, Organic, Mendocino — \$12 (13.9% alc./400 cases): Nose of dusty herbs, cocoa and shy berry fruit. Juicy and full of dark berry flavors that are nicely layered with brown spices; medium tannins. *Best Value / Score: 93*

Guenoc, 1999 Petite Sirah Reserve, Serpentine Meadow, Guenoc Valley — \$40 (14.5% alc./512 cases): Appealing, perfumed scents of blackberry, bright blueberry, shy toast, dried tarragon and dark chocolate. On the palate there's a cascade of blackberry fruit accented by characteristic black pepper. A mouth-filling, profoundly purple Petite that's big, yet balanced. *Score: 92*

Guenoc, 2000 Petite Sirah, North Coast — \$20 (14.5% alc./13,245 cases): Low-key but fragrant scents of mint, blackberry-cassis and mildly toasty oak that expand with further airing. Luscious and juicy with deep, concentrated, ripe blackberry-cassis fruit and muted spice, leading to a slightly peppery finish. Complex and delicious. *Score: 89*

Victor Hugo, 2000 Petite Sirah, Paso Robles — \$18 (13.8% alc./683 cases): Complex, intriguing nose of dark berries, mocha, dusty herbs and red meat. Similar flavors display nice depth, unfolding into a cocoa-tinged finish. *Score: 91*

La Filice, 2000 Petite Sirah, Hames Valley, Monterey — \$22 (14.7% alc./133 cases): Smoky, meaty nose. Rich, round and luscious on the palate with oodles of deep, concentrated, ripe blackberry fruit framed by ripe, medium tannins. Lip-smackingly delicious. *Score: 95*

Lolonis, 2000 Orpheus Petite Sirah, Heritage Vineyards, Redwood Valley — \$35 (13.7% alc./1,200 cases): Deep, liqueur-like aromas of blackberry and rose petals lead to a blockbuster palate full of ripe dark berry-black cherry fruit that is dense and deep, finishing long and peppery with a toffee flourish. The medium-full tannins are supple and nicely integrated. *Score: 88*

Madrigal, 2000 Petite Sirah, Napa Valley — \$33 (14.3% alc./900 cases): Ripe blackberry scents with light toast and hints of old leather and mineral. Round, fleshy and full bodied with medium-full tannins, offering loads of ripe, extracted, freshly crushed dark berry fruit tinged with subtle spicy notes of black pepper and anise. *Score: 88*

Marietta, 1999 Petite Sirah, California — \$18 (14.0% alc./1,500 cases): Reticent nose of anise-tinged blackberry and black cherry lead to similar flavors enhanced by a touch of white pepper; medium-full tannins. A bold, but not brash Petite. *Score: 90*

Markham, 1999 Petite Sirah, Napa Valley — \$24 (14.5% alc./1,900 cases): Expressive nose of red fruit, mint and a hint of gaminess. Smooth, round and richly textured with generous cherry-raspberry fruit and peppery spice that builds on the palate; tannins are noticeable, but well behaved. *Score: 86*

Novella, 2000 Petite Sirah, Estate, Paso Robles — \$13 (13.9% alc./1,462 cases): Slow-to-open nose of berry, brown spice and fudge; a second wave emits oak char and tack room, creamy oak and a hint of Petite funk. Smooth, plush, juicy and luscious with copious purple berry fruit. *Best Value / Score: 90*



Pacific Star, 2000 Petite Sirah, Mendocino County — \$26 (12.8 alc./700 cases): Cedary aromas of rhubarb, mocha and dust. Soft, friendly tannins mark flavors of black fruit, black pepper and spicy new oak. Spicy, tongue-tingling finish. *Score: 87*

Ridge, 2000 Petite Sirah, York Creek Vineyard, California — \$24 (14.1% alc./240 cases): A distinctive nose of brambly blackberry fruit, India ink, leather and loamy earth. Plump, luscious and juicy, the palate delivers abundant blackberry extract matched with medium-full tannins; needs cellaring. (Made from 90-year-old vines growing near the top of Napa's Spring Mountain.) *Score: 88*

Rockland, 2000 Petite Sirah, Napa Valley — \$30 (13.5% alc./500 cases): Fragrant, appealing nose of dark berry fruit, violets and white pepper with undertones of crushed blueberry. Smooth, round and luscious with medium-full, but well-behaved tannins. Rich and satisfying with oodles of dark berry fruit accented by orange marmalade, smoky oak and a suggestion of leathery Petite funk. A superbly balanced Pet with a long, subtle, peppery finish. *Score: 95*

Rosenblum, 2001 Petite Sirah, Rockpile Road Vineyard, Dry Creek Valley — \$34 (14.8% alc./650 cases): Rich nose offering complex scents of ripe blackberry, cracked black peppercorn, mocha and violets. Creamy, rich and smooth in the mouth, with ripe, medium tannins, and dazzling and fairly oozing extracted blackberry-currant fruit tinged with dark chocolate; black pepper accents the extended finish. Throws some sediment; decant carefully. (Made from 90-year-old hillside vines.) *Score: 94*

Stephen Ross, 2000 Petite Sirah, Napa Valley — \$32 (15.4% alc./220 cases): Fragrant, appealing nose of freshly crushed blackberry and brown spice. Smooth, round, plump and loaded with lusciously rich berry fruit. *Score: 92*

Stags' Leap Winery, 2000 Petite Syrah, Napa Valley — \$31 (13.9% alc./14,000 cases): Deeply fruited nose of freshly crushed blackberry, cassia, anise and blueberry accented by pleasant oak spice and vanilla. This flagship wine offers minerality both in the nose and subtly on the palate. Smooth, round and juicy, and loaded with ripe blackberry and red cherry fruit with hints of dried herb and white pepper; ripe, medium tannins. Finishes long with a blackberry syrup-like richness tinged with peppery spice and vanilla. Balanced and complex. *Score: 90*

Trentadue, 2001 Petite Sirah, Alexander Valley — (\$22/14.4% alc./908 cases): A love-hate nose (I loved it) with gamy notes in the lead followed by blackberry, anise, bay leaf and some oak char. Round and plush with velvety tannins, this complex, Rhône-like Petite delivers what the bouquet foretells and more, including cherry and minty chocolate, which resonate in the extended finish. (Blended with 19 percent syrah.) *Score: 88*

T-Vine Cellars, 2001 Petite Sirah, Frediani Vineyard, Napa Valley — \$31 (14.1% alc./360 cases): Nose of crushed wild blackberry, white chocolate and a subtle whiff of India ink. Round, smooth and seductively rich with medium tannins, this classy, generous Petite offers deep flavors of extracted blackberry essence and black pepper spice; long, vanilla-tinged finish. *Score: 93*

Rustic Pets

Vincent Arroyo, 1999 Petite Sirah, Estate, Napa Valley — \$28 (13.8% alc./913 cases): Scents of black cherry and berry laced with vanillin oak. Smooth and rich on the palate with deep blackberry extract; burly yet round with medium-full tannins. Red berry flourish in the finish. *Score: 88*

Behrens & Hitchcock, 2001 Petite Sirah, Spring Mountain District — \$40 (15.2% alc./675 cases): Nose of boysenberry, cassia, plum, creamy oak and white chocolate lead to dense, intense flavors of brambly blackberry, plum compote, pie crust and black pepper. Creamy in texture, yet showing a bit of alcoholic warmth, this big, bold unfiltered and unfiltered mountain-grown Petite displays a solid tannic structure with a dense core of blackberry fruit arguing for several years of cellaring. (Synthetic cork closure.) *Score: 90*

Edmeades, 1999 Petite Sirah, Eaglepoint Ranch — \$25 (13.7% alc./1,134 cases): Meaty, gamy, Rhône-like nose. Generous dollop of ripe blackberry fruit on the palate; good depth; medium tannins. *Score: 88*

Foppiano, 2000 Petite Sirah, Sonoma County — \$21 (13.5% alc./10,000 cases): Inviting scents of dried lavender and dark berry enhanced by chocolate, pepper and brown spice preface an explosive mouthful of jammy boysenberry-black cherry fruit, black pepper spice, dried herbs and vanillin oak.

Noticeable medium-full tannins, but the bountiful flavors make up for them in this well-crafted youngster; absolutely delicious after lots of breathing time. *Score: 88*

Lava Cap, 2000 Petite Sirah Reserve, El Dorado — \$30 (15.1% alc./1,100 cases): Pleasant perfume of blackberry, violets and subtle honeysuckle (suggesting viognier in the blend). Round and moderately rich with fruity blackberry flavor and medium-full tannins. *Score: 85*

McDowell, 2000 Petite Sirah Reserve, Mendocino — \$20 (14.2% alc./200 cases): Enticing scents of ripe boysenberry, mocha and toasty oak. Densely textured and loaded with jammy, dark berry fruit accented by dark chocolate and a hint of pepper; big and chewy with bold tannins. *Score: 88*

Mirassou, 2000 Petite Sirah, Vineyard Select, Monterey County — \$16 (13.0% alc./1,215 cases): Pleasing nose of ripe blackberry and dried herbs enhanced by a subtle note of red meat. Loaded with ripe berry fruit; round and plump with medium-full tannins. *Score: 90*

Pride Mountain Vineyards, 2000 Petite Sirah, Napa Valley — \$40 (15.3% alc./265 cases): Dark in color and impervious to light, this wine is massively powerful and boldly flavored. Aromas of freshly crushed raspberry and red cherry fairly burst from the glass, accented by bittersweet chocolate, glove leather and a dusting of white pepper. Extracted and concentrated with gripping tannins that are surprisingly soft and chewy, this full-bodied Petite delivers wave after wave of black raspberry-black cherry fruit, mineral and dried sage with no new oak to buffer the intensity. *Score: 91*

Quixote, 2000 Panza Red Table Wine, Stags' Leap Ranch, Napa Valley — \$36 (14.7% alc./400 cases): Carl Doumani's take on this varietal offers aromas of blackberry and vanilla tinged with a hint of volatility. Soft and mellow on the palate with straightforward blackberry-blueberry fruit; medium-full tannins. (100 percent petite sirah.) *Score: 85*

Rosenblum, 2001 Petite Sirah, Pickett Road, Napa Valley — \$22 (14.6% alc./750 cases): Lots of smoky oak in the nose — resembling bacon rind — along with shy blackberry fruit and hints of black olive and brown spice. Downright tannic, but displaying a dense core of black fruit and ever-present smoky oak, this Pet's bound for the cellar. *Score: 85*

Switchback Ridge, 2000 Petite Sirah, Peterson Family Vineyard, Napa Valley — \$45 (14.5% alc./310 cases): Brambly blackberry fruit and mocha define the nose and are replicated on the palate in bright, intense flavors enhanced by notes of brown spice, dried herbs, black pepper and a subtle tarry component. A bear of a wine sporting full tannins matched by a deep core of fruit. *Score: 87*

Based in San Francisco, Steve Pitcher has been a contributing editor for The Wine News since 1992 and, among other vinous endeavors, is president of the Bay Area Chapter of the German Wine Society. He can be reached via e-mail at wine2words@aol.com.