



P.S., I Love You

The first California winery to "discover" the potential of Petite Sirah, Concannon Vineyard remains at the forefront of promoting this grape with events such as the recent Blue Tooth Tour.



Diaz Communications

**After years of
Cabernet Sauvignon
infatuation, more and more
wine lovers now have
an undeniable affection
for Petite Sirah**

By Deborah Grossman

In the heart of Napa Valley, the burgeoning reputation of Petite Sirah is evident at Robert Biale Vineyards. Owner Bob Biale is replanting his estate vines with the native Rhône Valley varietal. And Biale asked rancher/winegrower Tom Gamble to grow Petite Sirah for him in the Rutherford district, right in the middle of prime Cabernet Sauvignon territory.

Though Gamble and his partner Bill Davies produce Origin-Napa's Paramount wine, a highly prized Bordeaux blend, his heart lies with Petite Sirah. "I fell in love with Petite Sirah from Stag's Leap Winery and Freemark Abbey Winery early in my wine-tasting odyssey," he says. "Petite Sirah's time has come. It's growing on the awareness scale, similar to where Zinfandel or Syrah was 15 years ago."

Contrary to popular belief, Petite Sirah is neither Syrah nor a small red wine. With rich, fruit-forward flavors, Petite or Pet for short, can only be called a big red wine. Think Syrah with more tannic structure or Cabernet with more body and peppery-berry flavors. After a long run as a blending agent to enhance other reds, Petite at last is turning heads on its own. Wine drinkers and critics alike are taking notice.

The Blue Tooth Tour

For the first time, Petite Sirah—Rosenblum Cellars 2001 Rockpile Road vineyard—won Best Wine of Show at the 2003 San Francisco Bay Wine Competition. And even in Napa Valley, where Cabernet Sauvignon is king, Petite Sirah is emerging from the shadow of other red wines.

At Tra Vigne, the wine country temple of Italian dining in St. Helena, Calif., wine education director Jeff Porter observes more and more diners who order bottles of Petite Sirah. At Pizzeria Tra Vigne next door, where the wine is sold by the glass, "Petite Sirah stands up well to our rustic pizzas like the Ducati with sausage, salami, smoked pork and mozzarella," he says. "We go through three cases a week."

Reflecting the renewed interest in Petite Sirah and their passion for what they call their "Pet," winemakers organized a group three years ago, named P.S. I Love You, to increase public knowledge of the wine. Jim Concannon of Concannon Vineyard in Livermore, Calif., the father of Petite Sirah in the state, spearheaded the group's 12-city trade and media tour this spring. "We called our expedition the 'Blue Tooth Tour' because Petite is so deeply colored, almost inky black, that it stains your teeth!"

Concannon regales audiences with the tale of how he became the first American winemaker to bottle Petite Sirah on its own in 1964. "A wine merchant knew the wine and pressed me to sell it," he explains. "My immigrant grandfather knew our gravelly soil was similar to the soil in the French Rhône area. Soon after he launched the winery in 1883, he planted Petite Sirah vines from France and celledared many barrels, all earmarked for Concannon's Burgundy blend."

Concannon admits he was skeptical at first about bottling Petite Sirah as a varietal, but he hasn't looked back. "Since 2002, sales of Concannon Heritage Petite Sirah have doubled. And we are replanting over 50 acres with Petite Sirah."

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Dale Vaughn-Bowen

"Growing Petite Sirah is not easy," says Tom Lane, winemaker at Crooked Vine Winery in Livermore, Calif. "[This] is a major reason why the grape, though planted in California by 1884, was not bottled on its own for 80 years."

Minestrone And Ribs

At Freemark Abbey, winemaker Ted Edwards crafts many wines, but he is especially fond of the winery's Petite Sirah, which he describes in culinary terms: "Petite Sirah is a succulent, thick minestrone soup with a heady aroma, full of texture and flavors. Cabernet is an unadorned tomato soup."

When it comes to food, Chris Hinton, owner of The Wine Store in Alpharetta, Ga., is a fan of Petite Sirah with ribs in a rich barbecue sauce. Most Petite Sirahs have the intensity to stand up to such hearty fare, and the wine's spicy, berry quality mingles nicely with the spicy-sweet sauce. Hinton fell in love with Petite Sirah when he was an offensive lineman for the Atlanta Falcons.

"When we played the San Francisco 49ers, I visited wine shops in the city and grew passionate about wine in general and Petite Sirah in particular," he says. "My current favorite is Lolonis Winery's 2000 Orpheus Petite Sirah for its complex yet smooth drinkability. We serve Orpheus by the glass at Bin 75, our tasting room next to the store. When customers who don't know Petite Sirah taste it, more often than not they buy a case."

Another reason Hinton recommends Petite Sirah its value. "For \$30 you can buy an excellent Petite Sirah, but with a \$30 Cabernet, you can't count on quality."

At Elizabeth's on 37th in Savannah, Ga., co-owner Gary Butch says people mistakenly ask for Petite Sirah because they think it is Syrah. "As customers become more knowledgeable about wine, they branch out to other reds. Five years ago, we stocked only one Petite Sirah. Now, we cellar Clayton Vineyards, Rosenblum, Turley Hayne Vineyard and Jepson, all of which age beautifully."

Louis Foppiano of Foppiano Winery in Healdsburg advises new red wine drinkers not to start their red wine tasting with Petite Sirah. "We are getting most of our converts to Petite Sirah from other red wines. Petite Sirah is just too heavy for the novice," he says.

A Noble History

Petite Sirah's heavy, full-bodied mouthfeel, deep color and tannins are what garnered the varietal's reputation as a blending wine. Giovanni Foppiano, Louis's grandfather, was another early producer of varietal Petite Sirah. Like Concannon's grandfather, he planted Petite Sirah vines amidst other Rhône vines such as Carignan and Grenache. "When we made red wine and it wasn't up to snuff," Louis remembers, "blending in Petite Sirah instantly improved the wine."

In the late 1960s, thanks largely to Concannon and Foppiano, Petite Sirah burst onto the California red

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-Françoise Brooks, Pleasanton, CA

wine scene. Carl Doumani, founder of Stag's Leap Winery and owner of another Napa Valley winery called Quixote, fondly recalls his first mouthful of Petite Sirah at a blind tasting in the '60s. "I immediately planted Petite Sirah on my Stag's Leap estate at a time when everyone else was planting Cabernet and Merlot."

California's acreage of Petite Sirah peaked in 1976 at 14,000 acres. During the 1970s, however, Robert Mondavi Winery and other Napa Valley wineries became known as exemplars of the Bordeaux varietals. Wineries scrambled to plant more Cabernet, Merlot and other Bordeaux components. Interest in Petite Sirah waned. By 1995, California plantings of Petite Sirah had dropped to 2,400 acres.

Back in the Limelight

Though still a tiny percentage of California wine grapes, acreage has increased 75 percent since 1995, to 4,200 acres. Why the resurgence of Petite Sirah rather than other Rhône varietals like Carignan or Grenache?

"Nature gave Petite Sirah, with its small berries and thin skin, a high concentration of aromas and flavors, more than other reds," says Edwards of Freemark Abbey. "Petite Sirah is robust enough to pair with highly seasoned food. We started making Petite Sirah again a few years ago, and it's already the biggest seller of our Key to the Abbey retail wine club."

More Petite Sirah is aging in barrels throughout California. In Mendocino, producers such as Lolonis Winery, Navarro Winery and Pacific Star have increased production in the last five years. Mendocino Petite Sirahs are a special bargain. Like many Mendocino wines, they are priced well below similar Napa or Sonoma offerings.

Though Vina Robles is one of only a handful of Paso Robles wineries making Petite Sirah, their production has increased threefold in the past seven years. "The region's warm climate and loamy soil yields a wine with a sweet complexity, dark, ripe fruit flavors and aromas," says Vina Robles marketing manager Mark Laderriere.

Even Australia is riding the Petite Sirah wave, though it's known there as Durif [See *Petite Sirah's strange history on page 31*]. Australian production increased by 73 percent from 2002 to 2003, led in part by De Bortoli Wines. "[Petite Sirah] is a great choice for those Cabernet Sauvignon fans who want something a little heartier," says Alison Kaspersetz, spokesperson for De Bortoli. "And it works for those who want a change from the flooded Shiraz [Syrah] market."

Getting Acquainted

Long under the radar of most wine drinkers, Petite Sirah is steadily winning over red wine lovers. Winemakers, retailers and restaurateurs all agree the primary deterrent to acceptance is lack of knowledge.

Introducing Petite Sirah to more wine lovers was the mission of the recent PS, I Love You "Blue Tooth" tour. At the tour's launch in San Francisco—held appropriately on Valentine's Day weekend—Jim Concannon observed the buzz around the room. "This, the 40th anniversary year of Petite Sirah's first bottling, is a great time for 15 of the many passionate Petite Sirah winemakers to share their deep-rooted history with the grape and spread the word about the wine."

But it only took one bottle of Bogle Vineyards 2001 Petite Sirah to convince Françoise Brooks of Pleasanton, Calif., that a miracle had occurred. "I had always been a Merlot girl and my husband a Cabernet boy," she says. "But with Petite Sirah, we are now, for the first time, happily sitting down together to share a bottle of fine red wine."

To learn more about Petite Sirah, visit www.psiloveyou.org.

Deborah Grossman is a San Francisco Bay area writer and columnist on wine and food. She likes to travel with her husband, cook with her grandchildren and discover new wines.

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SON OF SYRAH

OK, if Petite Sirah isn't Syrah, then what is it? According to Dr. Carole Meredith, who completed DNA testing on the grape at the University of California Davis in 1996, it's the son of Syrah. Petite Sirah's mother, she discovered, is an ancient French grape called Peloursin.

Adding to the confusion is the varietal's other name, Durif. But this anomaly has a nonscientific explanation. Dr. François Durif, a French grape nurseryman, created a new grape by cross-pollinating Syrah with Peloursin and naming it after himself. When Durif vines were planted in California in 1884, growers called it Petite Sirah, a name that may have been used in France along with Durif. The name Petite Sirah stuck in California because the grape clusters yielded small grapes, much smaller than the more familiar Rhône grape, Syrah.

Petite Sirah is a finicky grape, says Tom Lane, winemaker at Crooked Vine Winery in Livermore, Calif., and former winemaker of 11 years for Concannon Vineyard. "Growing Petite Sirah is not easy," he says. "[This] is a major reason why the grape, though planted in California by 1884, was not bottled on its own for 80 years. Petite Sirah doesn't do well when it rains before harvest ... [and] the winemaker must balance the wine's dark berry-peppery character without letting the tannins get too aggressive. And like old Zinfandel vines, it's worth keeping old Petite Sirah vines going strong, which leads to bold, beautiful flavors."

Lane enjoys all winemaking challenges and will soon release his first Petite Sirah vintage at Crooked Vine. Petite Sirah isn't the hottest new red wine, he says with a smile; instead, it's the "new black."

As this dark horse grape emerges from the pack of red wines, there is one more detail to confuse us. The wine can be spelled Petite Syrah or Petite Sirah. Is this a marketing ploy by the early growers? Or was it simply easier to remember Sirah rather than Syrah? We may need another 80 years to find out.

—Deborah Grossman

