

A PETITE FEAT

Linda Murphy

As objective as wine critics try to be, most have a style or two of wine, or certain grape varieties, they don't enjoy drinking. Consumers certainly have prejudices, too. Mom told me to never to say "hate," so I'll just say that there are a few wines that could disappear tomorrow and I wouldn't miss them.

Take sparkling Shiraz. Please, take it. It may be beloved Down Under, yet it reminds me of Robitussin cough syrup, which I've had to choke down by the tablespoonfuls for years as an asthmatic. I have the same gag reflex to Campari, the Italian aperitif, as I do to sparkling Shiraz; the memory of wheezing between gulps of Robitussin is one I don't want to dredge up.

South African Pinotage, a crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsault, gives many wine lovers fits for its sometimes volatile (think wet paint) aromas, though many producers do a fine job, including Kanonkop, Simonsig, Southern Right and Spice Route. A well-known British writer abhors Beaujolais, yet he doesn't want the Beaujolais to know that. A surprising number of critics consider Sauvignon Blanc as insipid, or worse. Muscadet? Not everyone's cup of tea.

And then there is Petite Sirah, a love-it-or-hate-it wine if there ever was one. Flamboyantly fruity, massively tannic, and with a glass- and tooth-staining purple color, traditional California Petite Sirah is anything but petite. It's muscular, meaty and peppery, and usually requires a few years in the bottle and a couple hours of

aeration before it's softened enough to drink.

Petite Sirah is so potent that it's used to boost the color and structure of otherwise puny Zinfandels and Cabernet Sauvignons, and is often a major component in field-blended wines, which mimic the hearty, rustic wines made by Italian immigrants from "mixed blacks" grapes, beginning in the late 1800s in California.

Petite Sirah can be such a monster that it is among my least favorite varietals. Like so many other wine competition judges, I cringe when I'm assigned the Petite Sirah category, because I know I'm in for a long, painful day of tannic assault and blueberry-syrup flavors.

Yet for every one of me, there is a Petite Sirah fanatic, someone who loves the wine for the very reasons I don't. In fact, there is the "P.S. I Love You" fan club, comprised of producers and consumers who are as devoted to their grape as members of the Zinfandel Advocates & Producers are to theirs.

It was with some shock last month that I discovered a Petite Sirah that not only was drinkable but was utterly delicious. It was a big, concentrated wine, to be sure, yet its racy wild-berry flavors, smooth (!) tannins, seamless integration and mouthwatering acidity earned a platinum medal from me and a "wow" reaction from several other judges who tasted it in the Best of Show round at the Critics Challenge competition in San Diego.



We voted it Wine of the Year, quite an accomplishment considering the judges, all journalists, are a somewhat jaded lot when it comes to Petite Sirah. When the winner was unveiled -- the 2006 Clayhouse Estate Petite Sirah from Paso Robles (\$25) -- I recalled being in the winery's Red Cedar vineyard a year or so prior to Critics Challenge and getting a tour from owner Rick Middleton and his winemaker, David Frick.

"We think Petite Sirah can be something special from this site. It's a focus wine for us," he told me that day. I thought to myself, "Yeah, right. Good luck with that."

Now that I've discovered that Middleton's Petite Sirah goes nicely with the crow I'm now eating, I have a newfound appreciation for Petite Sirah. Not all of them, mind you, because too many are still bombastic enamel-strippers. Yet my mind is now open to the possibility that some Petite Sirahs can make me happy....

So it seems there is a surge in expertly made, less jammy, less tannic, more food-friendly Petite Sirahs from California. Bring 'em on, I say, and give me and other doubters more choices in style when it comes to this potentially prodigious varietal.

I've been forced to give PS a chance, and while I'm not an overnight convert to the entire Petite Sirah category, I know that certain bottlings can be well-mannered and pleasurable rather than painful. I'll no longer paint the PS category with a broad, scornful brush.

