

A Petite (Sirah) Passion

By Gerald D. Boyd

Petite Sirah is the dark knight of California red winemaking. Neither as regal as Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir, nor as middle-class as Zinfandel, Petite Sirah is the everyman warrior that is slowly crossing class lines and moving up.

Perhaps it is the tenacity of this grape variety as a survivor that attracts so many wine fans. Petite Sirah was once a common grape in the field blends that dominated Northern California viticulture at the turn of the 20th century, though it fell victim to upstarts like Cabernet Sauvignon and the showy Zinfandel. Petite Sirah was struggling then, often serving in the ignoble capacity offering blending support for Zinfandel. Acreage of Petite began to drop, and it wasn't until the 1990s that the variety began to make a comeback, even though at that time it faced a new struggle for attention with the more fashionable Syrah.

Then there was the identity question. 'PS I Love You,' (PSILY) the industry advocacy organization, has outlined the journey of Petite Sirah from France to California. In 1880, Francois Durif, a French nurseryman, grew a new variety from seed material of an old French variety called Peloursin and named the new grape Durif. And the story gets more curious. Although Durif didn't know it at the time, the pollen source was Syrah, so the parentage of Peloursin and Syrah produced a grape known as Durif which in some parts of France was also called Petite Sirah. Confused?

In 1884, Durif was transplanted

from France to California, and the name Petite Sirah went along. During the following decade, phylloxera destroyed virtually all of the true Syrah planted in California, but Petite Sirah survived. Then, in the 1970s, Petite Sirah got another identity check when two French grape scientists identified Petite Sirah in California as Durif. But it was DNA testing in 1996 that determined that Petite Sirah and Durif are synonymous, and that Durif is the offspring of cross pollination between Peloursin and Syrah.

As abstract and obscure as that little bit of trivia may be to the wine consumer, grape growers and winemakers found a firm foundation in this finding on which to launch a new push to elevate Petite Sirah to the ranks of a top red wine.

For this piece on Petite Sirah, I tasted 10 Petites (or 'Pets') from various parts of California, and you can find my comments on the WRO Wine Reviews page. Remembering the heavy, inky, rustic Petite Sirahs of years past, I was hoping to taste wines with more finesse and less aggression--but maybe that's not what Petite Sirah is all about.

One thing I noticed about the Petite Sirah bottles in my tasting was the bottles themselves, which were conspicuously hefty. Bottle weight is something that I usually don't pay much attention to, though it was quite notable in this tasting. Two of the bottles were noticeably heavier than the others, so I weighed all ten bottles empty and discovered the heaviest topped out at 42 ounces, another weighed



in at 32 ounces, while the average weight was 22 ounces and the lightest, 16 ounces. Why the big deal about bottle weight? It's about protecting the environment, a responsibility that some wineries seem to be avoiding when it comes to packaging their wine. Twice as much glass, twice the weight, more expensive to transport--all that and more adds up to a bigger negative impact on the environment. Maybe if the wineries in the 'Heavy Bottle Brigade' worried more about the quality of the wine and less about the package, we'd all be better off.

A curious thing about Petite Sirah is that the berries are small but the wine they produce is big and burly. Petite Sirah can be summed up in one word: Concentration; concentration of color, textures, flavors, and by all means tannins. The flavor profile of Petite Sirah is centered on berries--blackberries, blueberries and sometimes black cherries. It has very good structure, supported by a strong firm tannin backbone, good acidity, and layers of ripe, sometimes jammy fruit and the occasional hint of anise. Petite Sirah is a red wine that will stand up to the heartiest meal you can put on the table, and yet it is easy to drink and not at all pretentious.

In his excellent book, *Wine Atlas of California*, Australia's veteran wine writer and winemaker James Halliday offered an interesting view on Petite Sirah, which might not be too far from the struggles Australian winemakers experienced when trying to bring Shiraz (Syrah) under control. 'If given even half a chance, it (Petite Sirah) will produce a dark colored, massive, tough, long-lived wine, requiring a supremely sensitive touch by the maker to invest the wine with enough fruit to provide balance.'

In the year 2000, Petite Sirah acreage totaled just under 4,000 acres in California, but by 2006 it had jumped more than 2,000 acres to top out at 6,093, though the total is still less than the 7,500 acres of Petite Sirah that were planted in California in the 1930s. These numbers and everything you ever wanted to know about Petite Sirah, including a list of member wineries, is available through the PSILY website, www.psiloveyou.org

