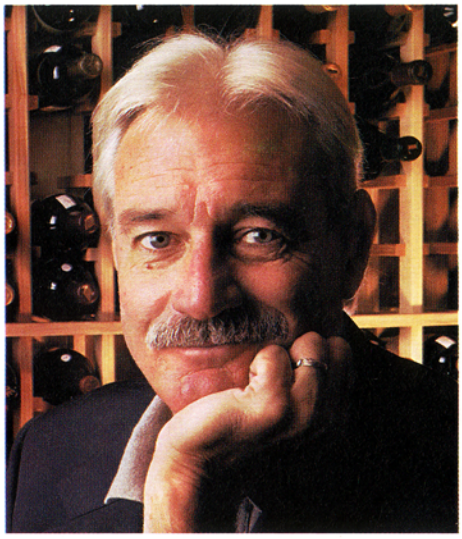
James Laube

Petite's Road Back

Winemakers are often at a loss to explain why Petite Sirah, with its devout, cultlike following, isn't more popular with the general public. Still, this dense, hearty, muscular, inky-black red wine is enjoying an unprecedented surge in admiration among those who know it best, thanks to a run of great vintages and vastly improved winemaking.

So why isn't it more fashionable? It's not for lack of trying. Petite Sirah is distinctive, easy to drink, versatile with a wide range of foods, and capable of making enormously complex wines.

"There seem to be enough people who agree it's a great wine," says Carl Doumani of Quixote winery in Napa Valley. Doumani began making Petite Syrah (as he spells it) in 1972, the year he revived the Stags' Leap Winery, also in Napa, and in his truest contrarian fashion, Doumani stuck with Petite, even as consumers clamored for Cabernet. Doumani eventually acquiesced, adding Cabernet to his lineup. But he never gave up on Petite, and when he sold Stags' Leap a few years ago and started Quixote nearby, Petite Sirah figured prominently in his plans. He kept his favorite Petite vineyard, and has recently added acreage.



Some growers refused to uproot Petite Sirah in favor of newfangled varieties.

Next year, Doumani will release a 100 percent Petite Sirah under the Quixote label, and to make sure everyone notices, it will be sealed with a twist-off cap, his way of protesting the shortcomings and inadequacies of the cork. He also has a Rhône-style blend called Panza (named for Don Quixote's sidekick). The 2000 vintage (93 points, $36) is anchored by Petite, but also includes other Rhône grapes: Grenache, Mourvèdre and Syrah.

"When people have a great bottle of Petite, they say, 'Jesus Christ, this is great,'" says Doumani. "It's really a friendly wine. I don't know why it elicits that response. Maybe people don't expect much from it and they're surprised when they find out how much they like it."

While Petite Sirah isn't going gangbusters like Syrah, or overboard like Merlot, it is experiencing a groundswell of support. The number of domestic acres planted to this distinctive California red has increased by nearly 50 percent since 1997, and is now at 4,500 acres. That's a far cry from the 1980s, when that figure was closer to 11,000 acres. But the vines that survived are in most instances in excellent sites and owned by growers who refused to bend to fashion and uproot them in favor of newfangled varieties. That pressure has led to moments of despair among die-hard vintners such as Lou Foppiano, who owns century-old vines in Sonoma and came to symbolize the stubborn refusal to give up on a cherished grape.

Part of Petite's problem was its well-deserved reputation for being rustic; especially when picked underripe, it can render the kind of wine that could seemingly strip the enamel off your teeth. Typically dark, dense and rich, it can be effusively fruity, with plum, wild berry and blackberry flavors, and can also veer into beefy, peppery, fresh earth scents. New oak can give it a toasty melted chocolate aroma. It is also quite tannic, which is a plus for those who like to chew on their wines, and why it has long been favored as a blending grape. Petite gives lighter-colored reds, such as Zinfandel, a darker hue, a firmer backbone and a wider range of flavors.

Perhaps one reason Petite hasn't won wider appreciation is that for years its heritage wasn't known and it was viewed as an orphan grape. That led it to be considered more of a workhorse than a thoroughbred variety.

But recent research has determined that Petite Sirah is actually a French variety called Durif. Durif is part of the Rhône grape family, its parents being Peloursin, an obscure grape, and Syrah. For years grape experts had difficulty sorting out Petite's origin because most of the vineyards were field blends of many varieties. It wasn't clear whether Petite Sirah was one grape or several, and it was only after that was cleared up that the question of its heritage could even be asked.

More importantly, winemakers are applying the same techniques to Petite that they are to other wines, seeking riper, more opulent flavors, and showing a greater appreciation for what can be accomplished with Petite. If you try the 2000s from Pride, Switchback Ridge, Quixote or Shafer (the Relentless is a blend of Syrah and Petite), or 2001s from JC Cellars, Rosenblum or Switchback Ridge, you'll understand why the excitement is real.

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