

Small name, big flavor for wine

Petite sirah's misleading moniker doesn't hamper popularity

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If petite sirah has a problem, it may be that the grape's name is confusing or misleading.

"It is neither petite nor is it straight sirah," said Richard Ripken, owner of Ripken Vineyards and Winery in Lodi.

Recent genetic studies have shown the variety is a result of cross pollination between sirah (which is also known as syrah and shiraz) and peloursin, both old French varieties. It first released by a French nurseryman in 1880 and dubbed Durif.

And while petite sirah's tight, dense clusters contain small berries, wine made from them is anything but little.

"In Lodi we've found that it is a peppery, smoky, blackberry type of wine with intense flavors," Ripken said. "It has a great deal of tannins in it, more than zinfandel and more than cabernet and merlot."

With that intense flavor as well as a dense, nearly opaque color, petite sirah has been a niche wine, used primarily in blending wine, able to bolster a tepid cabernet or darken a pale zinfandel.

"If you have a wine with a hole in it, petite sirah will fill it," Ripken said.

Currently, however, an increasing number of winemakers are crafting varietal petite sirahs, wineries are demanding more of the fruit and an increasing number of acres are being planted. PS I Love You, a group of petite sirah growers and winemakers formed in 2002 to promote the variety, now includes Ripken and others from the Lodi area.

Lodi is a leading producer, sending in excess of 18,000 tons of petite sirah to wineries in 2005, more than three times as much as any other winegrape-growing district in the state. And there's demand for more.

"We're making a name for ourselves," Ripken said. "It's selling and it sells outside the district, too."

That's an exception in an otherwise soft market for winegrapes, said Nat DiBuduo, president of Allied Grape Growers, a Fresno-based cooperative that helps producers market their fruit.

California wineries are apparently holding a great deal of inventory in their tanks from the 2005 bumper crop, and DiBuduo has received few inquiries about this fall's harvest, except for petite sirah and a few other niche varieties.

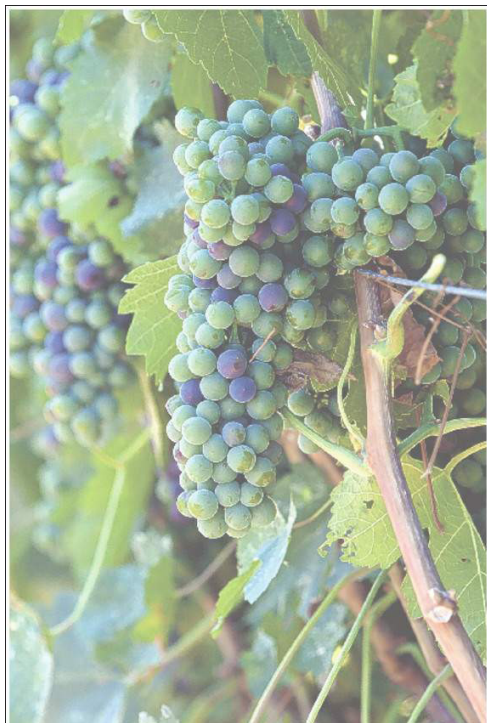


Larry Mettler shows some of the petite sirah grapes he grows in the Lodi area.
Credit: Craig Sanders/The Record

"There have been more inquiries from the various wineries for petite sirah throughout California," he said last week. "Right now, I would say there is more demand than there are available grapes on today's market."

New petite sirah vineyards are being created, particularly in San Joaquin County and along the north coast, DiBuduo said. However, the larger winegrape market remains soft, and he cautioned against excess enthusiasm.

"I wouldn't go out and plant thousands of acres of it, but I would look at it and evaluate it as we look at future needs."



Petite sirah's tight, dense clusters contain small berries. Lodi grape grower Larry Mettler plans to add a few acres to supplement his current production of about 3,000 cases a year.

Credit: Craig Sanders/The Record

Larry Mettler, a Lodi winegrape grower and owner of Mettler Family Vineyards, plans to add a few acres to supplement his current production of about 3,000 cases a year. His 2003 vintage is collecting fistfuls of gold and double-gold awards at competitions nationwide.

"It's amazing. Fun," he said. "We're excited about petite sirah. We think it's a variety that gives you another choice on the red." Mettler was one of the earliest members of PS I Love You.

"We're trying to promote and legitimate petite sirah as a noble variety," he explained. "It's a great variety that we think kind of got lost over the years."

According to PS I Love You, the offspring of sirah and peloursin was identified by Francois Durif, the nurseryman who named the new grape after himself. Susceptible to fungal diseases in the relatively damp climate of its birthplace, it never caught on with French growers.

But Durif thrived in the drier climate of California, where it was introduced in 1884, and over time took on the name petite sirah. It became widely grown in the state, peaking in 1976 at more than 14,000 acres, but lost favor as growers ripped out vineyards to supply surges in consumer demand for white wines and, later, cabernet sauvignon.

Plantings fell to as low as 1,700 acres in 1995, but have since recovered to about 6,100 acres in California. Outside of the United States, about 500 acres of petite sirah are cultivated in Australia, with a smattering in other countries.

"It is a survivor," said Jo Diaz, PS I Love You executive director. "It's got wonderful history, wonderful lineage."

Its immigrant heritage parallels that of most Americans, she said.

"It's a perfect United States-success story. It probably traveled through Ellis Island as a cutting," Diaz noted.

Since its arrival, petite sirah has survived the phylloxera epidemic of the late 1800s that decimated many other grape varieties; Prohibition, when it was sometime made into sacramental wine; as well as the 1980s push for cabernet.

When PS I Love You was launched, Diaz noted, she compiled a list of 60 grape growers and wine producers.

"Today, it's four years later. I've got 100 growers and 329 producers," she said. "Tell me there isn't something quietly going on."

What's going on is another shift in consumer preferences, said Jon Fredrikson, principal with Gomberg, Fredrikson & Associates, an industry consulting and research firm in Woodside.



The petite sirah is a historic grape variety making a comeback. A number of local growers and winemakers are touting its qualities.

Credit: Clifford Oto/The Record

While petite sirah remains a relatively small slice of total wine sales, it has shown strong gains based on scanner data from food stores. Fredrikson reported a roughly 80 percent jump in petite sirah sales in 2005 and another 62 percent rise in just the first six months of this year.

"It went out of style and now it's coming back because of the phenomenal consumer interest in every sort of new variety," he said.

"We have 100,000 different wines being marketed in the United States, right now. There's a lot of choices," he said. "There's always interest in trying the latest new thing. ... That contributes to this staggering proliferation of wine SKUs, stock-keeping units, wine items that are available."

"Everybody's on this quest to find yet the perfect wine," Fredrikson explained. "Some people want a great big wine. A black, inky petite sirah - that's a he-man's wine

Wine varietal promotional groups are not new, Fredrikson noted. Among the best-known in California, perhaps, are Zinfandel Advocates & Producers or simply ZAP, and the Rhone Rangers, but there have been many others.

They have varying degrees of success in convincing consumers to buy their wine.

But for Mettler, PS I Love You is less important as a marketing tool than as a way to share knowledge about the grape and wine. The Noble Petite Sirah Symposium, hosted in 2002 by Foppiano Vineyards in Healdsburg, was the spark that led to the association's formation. And the fifth annual edition of the event - open to winegrowers, winemakers and other industry professionals - is planned there Aug. 8.

"It's a time to share information on winemaking and viticulture at this symposium," Mettler explained. "There's not that much known about this variety, particularly among young winemakers."

"It's getting together amongst ourselves so we can make this variety work better."

