

CALIFORNIA PETITE SIRAH:

WHERE *PETITE* DOESN'T MEAN SMALL

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by **Richard Paul Hinkle**



For the longest time, Petite Sirah has been dismissed as blending wine, dumped as Durif, even dissed for not being Syrah (the latest, trendiest French glamour grape). But then the news came out: Petite Sirah *is* Syrah! Or at least half Syrah. Yes, the Sherlock Holmes of the wine world, Davis' Dr. Carole Meredith—who happily spends half her life shucking the "doc" title and "tastings" for "Carole" and good old down home "enjoyment"—discovered that Petite Sirah (AKA Durif) is the child of French varieties Syrah (ha!) and Peloursin. Ah ha! The pauper is a Prince.

Noble parentage, unveiled. Royalty.

"No wonder the stuff tasted so good," grumble any number of gruff old winegrowers to whom the variety was once and forever shall be known as "Petty Sarah." They knew the wine for exactly what it was, plush with fruit and flavor and capable of aging artfully for decades in the rare instance that it was vinified and bottled on its own.

But, for the longest time, the Petite was brought in from the bullpen as a blending savior. Need more color? Petite Sirah. Need for body? Petite Sirah. Need more flavor? Petite Sirah.

That was then. The "now" is this: Petite Sirah deserves to stand on its own. With that in mind, Louis Foppiano Jr.—his family has only been bottling the wine as a varietal since 1964—called for the First Annual Petite Sirah Symposium, held at Foppiano Vineyards (Healdsburg) last August. Some five dozen growers, winemakers and lovers of the newly anointed noble grape gathered to discuss its growing, vinting and marketing. Offered Foppiano, "There's been too much controversy over this grape. If Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc can be cloned together [sic] and called Cabernet Sauvignon—a noble grape—and Pinot Blanc and Gouais Blanc can be cloned together and called Chardonnay—another noble grape—it's high time to respect Dr. Carole Meredith's proven DNA results; namely that Petite Sirah was cloned from Syrah and Peloursin, and is in fact a 'noble' grape. We all need to get on with recognizing this grape's truly noble status."

GROWING THE GRAPE IS NOT SO EASY

If Meredith might caution Lou on his use of the word "clone" (it is more properly a hybridization, or "cross"), she nonetheless praises his motive. Meredith, in fact, noted in her seminal paper on Petite Sirah's newly discovered parenthood that, in France, the Petite Sirah was preferred to the Syrah "because of its lower vigor and yield and higher wine quality."

The growers and producers attending the seminar quickly agreed that Petite Sirah does better on benchland and hillside slopes than on heavy-soiled flatlands. "Petite Sirah does not like 'wet feet,'" says viticulturalist Paul Foppiano. "And in low-lying land, it is way too vigorous and doesn't color up."

"It just rots too damn easy," adds Lou. "That's why it's never done all that well in Europe, where they get sixteen inches of rain in the summer." (He also notes that, though Foppiano's first varietal bottling of Petite Sirah was in 1964, the great vintages of Foppiano Burgundy—1937, 1943, 1947, 1949, 1953 and 1957—were all Petite Sirah.)

Tom Lane is winemaker/GM at Concannon Vineyard, almost certainly the largest producer of Petite Sirah in California, making up to 40,000 cases a year. (Guenoc may have the largest single planting, at 75 acres, while Concannon checks in at 49 acres and Foppiano has 48 acres. Bogle is reported to be planting up to 75 new acres of Petite Sirah.) "We have very rocky soils in Livermore, and Petite Sirah does very well there," says Lane. "Our oldest vines were planted in either 1905 or 1911, and we use five different rootstocks. Petite does best on St. George and AXR1."

Napa Valley winegrower Carl Doumani—he used to own Stags' Leap Vineyard; his new venture is Quixote Winery—agrees with Paul: "Petite Sirah does not do well on the heavier soils, it gets way too vigorous. It is much easier to control and to bring in on rockier soils."

As to irrigation, it seems to depend on how porous the soils are. "We have to irrigate," says Lane, "simply because our soils are so loose. If we didn't water, the vines would just dry up and blow away!" George Guglielmo, who has 30-year-old vines in Morgan Hill: "We have our Petite on gravel-loam, on St. George and AXR. So we do irrigate, just prior to veraison."

Growers admitted to up to seven tons per acre in a discussion of yields, but much of the focus was turned to pounds-per-vine or pounds-per-linear-foot, which tend to give a more precise insight into fruit quality. Noted Vincenzo Cilurzo of Temecula, "At eight hundred dollars per ton, we can break even as low as two tons per acre." Others pointed to the higher prices some folks were getting for Petite Sirah—the high seemed to be Helen Turley, at \$75 per bottle—as a visible sign of the variety's new-found reputation for quality, thus the need for increased attention to crop levels and top quality fruit.

"We feel comfortable with five or six tons to the acre," said Paul Foppiano. "Any higher than that and it doesn't color up and you don't get the sugar." Added Guglielmo, "Overcropping is a real problem with Petite Sirah, and we aim for about three tons per acre. Probably because we have so many missing vines in our area." Lane agreed: "We have a lot of vines that are over thirty years old, and between missing vines and eutypa three tons per acre is about our max, too. But it depends on your trellising. In our newer vineyards, I can tell you that seven tons to the acre is too much on Scott Henry, and about five tons is max on a vertical system."

Ken Wilson, of Wilson Farms in Clarksburg, said, "You have to design your spacing and your rootstock to fit the soil. You've got to get real, here, to make a living. Wineries don't buy quality. For us, as farmers, the question is, How much fruit per linear foot? What can the vine handle? Petite Sirah is a real potassium sucker. With 5BB, you have to keep your drip on, whereas SO4 doesn't need as much water."

Several growers pointedly mentioned the need to keep potassium levels up. "If you don't have the potassium in place, your leaves will be red by mid July," said Bill Crawford, owner/wine-grower of McDowell Valley Vineyards.

GOES GOOD WITH ZINFANDEL

Many of the comments through the day had to do with Petite Sirah's place as a blending wine, particularly playing Tonto to Zinfandel's Lone Ranger. "We call Petite Sirah our 'band aid' wine," said Kent Rosenblum. "Ten to twenty-five percent of Petite Sirah will improve almost any Zinfandel."

Panel moderator Dan Berger, author/journalist, noted, "Chardonnay accounts for thirty percent of wine in California, and the top five varietals account for two-thirds of all wines sold. What is going to be the talking point for Petite Sirah? Even though it was the backbone of most blends from the thirties through the sixties, it remains virtually unknown to most Americans. As a varietal, we tend to dismiss the wine as simple and fruity when it's young, but when it has a chance to develop bottle bouquet, then you really begin to appreciate and respect the wine for its character. Petite Sirah was finally accepted by the Rhone Rangers a few months ago. Perhaps that's one means of getting the word out that we've got a really nice wine here that nobody knows about. Still, economics does play a part in all of this. As Lou noted, there's more Petite Sirah in Napa Valley than there is in Sonoma County, but it's unlikely that Opus One is going to pull out Cabernet Sauvignon in favor of Petite Sirah."

GOT TO KEEP IT OUT OF THE SUN

"We've been talking about the similarities of Petite Sirah and Zinfandel," noted Randy Phillips, proprietor of Segunda Vida Vineyards in Templeton. "They're both potassium hogs, and they're both thin-skinned, so you tend to farm them the same way." Chimed in Dwight Meadows of Diablo Vista Vineyards (Oakly, Contra Costa County), "We see slightly more sunburn problem with Petite Sirah

than with Zinfandel. Petite Sirah is very susceptible, so you've got to keep it out of the sun."

"We're using bilateral cordon trellising at Guenoc," said winemaker Derek Holstein. "The problem with head-trained vines is that you have such variation of sunlight into the vine that your coloring is all over the place."

Tom Lane pointed to three systems at Concannon: California sprawl, VSP and Scott Henry. "The Scott Henry is real open, maybe too open for Petite Sirah, especially on hot days, which we get in Livermore. With Vertical Shoot Positioning, we get real even coverage of the fruit zone."

"We find, with a cordon, that the fruit zone is too spread out for even applications," offered Paul Foppiano. "I agree with Tom, the vertical gives us a more even fruit zone, and it's open enough for the more moderate morning sun. Our vines on the wire ripen about ten days earlier, and have much better color, too."

"We have old Petites on both VSP and bilateral cordon," said Crawford. "With our newer vines, we're using much closer spacing, which gives us more crop per acre. We use deficit irrigation, and thin at veraison. We get around five tons to the acre with these young vines, and good wine character. The older vines, though, have greater color and greater fruit intensity. The wines are so black that you can't see the bottom of the glass with an inch of wine in it!"

WHO'S YOUR DADDY?

Carole Meredith noted that ATF is considering the use of Durif as a synonym of Petite Sirah (as, say, Primitivo is considered a synonym for Zinfandel). "While they are the same grape, I believe that it would only cause further confusion, and it's confusing enough already with people trying to figure out whether or not Petite Sirah and Syrah—not to mention Shiraz—are related."

"Everybody has a mother and a father. So does every grape. Syrah and Shiraz are the same grape. Petite Sirah and Durif are different than Syrah/Shiraz. Petite Sirah's parents are Syrah and Peloursin. Every Petite Sirah is the same as every other Petite Sirah. And, this is very important, Petite Sirah is not a clone of Syrah. Syrah was one parent. A clone is a variant *within* a variety."

"Then, too, like Zinfandel, Petite Sirah has no real European model. That's a disadvantage in one sense, but a real opportunity in another. You get to be your own varietal. You might, also, take a lesson from the Zinfandel people, who have started a Heritage program to put aside selections of old clonal material. The various clones are planted side-by-side at Oakville on St. George, so it will be easy to see which ones produce, in terms of quantity and in terms of quality."

YOU CAN USE GRAPES, TOO

Harvest timing seemed to vary, from winery to winery. "I like to see about twenty-four Brix," said Bill Regan, Foppiano's winemaker. "We've picked as low as twenty-two, when it was raining, but you get the best balance at twenty-four, where we do have to add tartaric. We'll have a pH of three-six in the juice, three-eight post malolactic, and three-six in the finished wine."

Carl Doumani earned the laugh of the day: "I guess we pick from twenty-two five to twenty seven!" When the tumult died down, he continued, "In 1980 it all got away from us. We couldn't get any pickers. Mostly now, it's tasting the grapes. Last year, at twenty-five, there was no flavor. We think that keeping the alcohol at fourteen or less is ideal, but you just don't have the mouth feel. Should we try the de-alcohol treatment? Might try it on, say, ten percent of a lot. But you definitely need the higher Brix to get the flavor."

"Our range has been twenty-two-five to twenty-six," says Lane. "You look at the seeds, you want them lignified. You want a little dimpling, a little shriveling in the berries. Usually, around twenty-three or twenty-four you get ideal flavor, color and seed development."

Rosenblum says, "We're of the riper school. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight. When the grapes begin to shrivel is when they really start to taste good. Hey, we'll wash the tanks if we have to!" Another big laugh.

Most winemakers talked about fermentation temperatures in the mid-80s, even as high as 90 degrees Fahrenheit. There was some question of rotary tanks and their problems of sulphur dioxide (alleviated, I am told, by running an eight-day cycle instead of the usual four). Some used whole berries, most did not.

The topic of maceration brought out a variety of regimes. Rosenblum said, "I like an extended maceration, it's great prior to cold soak. We usually press at about two Brix. When it starts to taste really soft, that's the key. Tom Lane opts for a five week maceration: "At two to three weeks, it's still quite rough. But if you're patient, it really softens up."

-The use of oak brought out equal variances. "Petite Sirah really soaks up oak," said Tom Lane. "We use both French and American, but the American oak we like is air-dried three years. That really makes a difference." Foppiano's Bill Regan opts for American oak, one quarter of which is replaced each year. Carl Doumani is leaning toward puncheons so that he can extend the wine's time in barrel without overdoing it. Derek Holstein uses both French and American oak, but suggests that the American stands up to the Petite's tannins better.

AT LEAST IT'S GOT FLAVOR!

Say what you want about Petite Sirah, it is a wine with abundant flavor. "This is not your afternoon porch wine," fairly shouted Carl Doumani. "This is a wine I like with barbecued lamb. Not roasted lamb. Barbecued lamb. Duck, or game in a marinade. I like the berry in the fruit that makes it go with all kinds of food. It's great with Szchwan."

"We aim for the fruity, berry style at Concannon," said Lane. "And a little of that earthy, mushroomy character, that really separates Petite Sirah from Syrah, with just a little oak in the background."

"My wife calls Petite Sirah the 'wine with balls,'" adds Bill Regan. "We're looking for pepper and jammy currant fruit, with tannin and oak in the background. We're trying to make a wine that ages well. I just opened a bottle of our 1981 the other night, and it was great."

OKAY, WHAT DO WE DO NOW, COACH?

The possibility of forming an organization like ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates and Producers) was discussed at length. Several attendees were ready to take up the new offer to join the Rhone Rangers, and work closely with that organization.

Gomberg-Fredrikson's Jon Fredrikson noted that Petite Sirah has been accumulating strength in the marketplace over the last five years. "When I came to California with Seagram thirty years ago, Chardonnay was on allocation and you couldn't sell Petite Sirah. Now that scenario is completely flip-flopped."

Lou Foppiano agreed. "There were a couple of times when I didn't bring our Petite Sirah to a public tasting, and people jumped all over me. 'Where's the Petite?' Our Petite has always had a following, and when we get wait staffs to try it, they really push it in their restaurant. They offer it by-the-glass at Michael's-on-Fifth in New York—at \$21 the glass!—and they're going through two cases a day!"

Dan Berger suggested one possible slogan to work with—PS, I Love You—but writer Steve Pitcher, ever the lawyer, noted that Palm Springs uses it and might get litigious. I'll offer one of my own (as incentive for others): "California Petite Sirah: Where *Petite* Doesn't Mean Small." It's a place to start. Where we finish is anybody's guess at this point, but at least we've got a pretty good mount on which to get there. •

[The author of seven wine books, Hinkle presently does extensive work for wineries, writing brochures, newsletters, press kits . . . and even books. He does jingles, too. Ask him about the great "cracker" escapade. He can be reached at hinklerich@ap.net.]