

the unknown grape petite sirah

BY SIMS BRANNON



There's nothing little about Petite Sirah (p'teet sir-aah). Wines made from this grape pack a wallop of tannin and acid and are intensely deep purple in color. Petite Sirah turns into big wine. It first became a popular variety in California in the early 1900s. In the 1960s, wineries (Concannon and Foppiano were the first) began producing varietally labeled Petite Sirah.

The grape's origins were a mystery until recently. Wine grapes aren't native to North America; they were all brought here from Europe. But today, no one grows Petite Sirah in Europe. By contrast, many well-known grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay are quite common there.

After years of confusion and controversy, researchers using DNA fingerprinting concluded in 1996 that Petite Sirah is the same as a nearly extinct French grape called Durif. Durif, also grown in Australia, is a cross between Syrah and an obscure grape called Peloursin. Peloursin is an old French variety from the Isere region, on the east side of the Rhône River, and Syrah is the noble variety from which the great wines of Côte Rotie and

Hermitage are made. So Petite Sirah has a distinguished French pedigree. Mystery solved!

BIGGER, BOLDER WINES

Petite Sirah grows best in warm regions, which explains its popularity in California. The largest plantings of Petite Sirah are in Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties, with additional concentration in Paso Robles. Within these areas, Petite Sirah is cultivated in the warmer sections. Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico also grow Petite Sirah in measurable quantities.

Grapes grown in warmer areas tend to produce bigger, bolder wines, and Petite Sirah is a perfect example of this maxim. The wines have a slightly higher alcohol content than most and carry lots of fruit, tannin, acid, and a wide array of aromatic notes such as chocolate, coffee, licorice, and blackberry. These are not wines for the faint of heart.

According to winemaker Steve Felten of EOS Estate Winery in Paso Robles, Petite Sirah is one of the easier grapes to grow. The grapes are consistent in quality and quantity from year to year, and no extraordinary vineyard management is required. The hard work arises when it comes time to make the wine. "The toughest challenge," Felten notes, "is balance" when making Petite Sirah. With so much going on in the grapes, the winemaker's job is to tame and harmonize.

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

Vintner John Staten of Field Stone Winery in Sonoma's Alexander Valley echoes Felten's view, adding, "The major issue is tannin management." Staten deals with the tannins by using whole berry fermentation for a portion of the grapes and by blending in a judicious amount of Viognier. By contrast, Felten tames tannins by managing the extraction process, using a

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heavier toast on the barrels, using a special Rhône yeast, and by blending in other grapes (such as Zinfandel) as needed. (As noted in issue 2 of *Swirl*, U.S. regulations allow a wine to be labeled as a single varietal if at least 75% of the juice comes from that particular grape.)

Food pairings with Petite Sirah seem obvious at first. Red meat, especially if grilled, is a clear pick for almost all Petite Sirahs. Think steak, lamb, venison, and even barbecued ribs. But there are alternatives: try Petite Sirah with hearty stews or soups, blackened Cajun fish, or spicy South Asian food.

Both Staten and Felten agree that a well-made Petite Sirah will age up to 10 years or more. Staten revealed that he's still drinking the '79 vintage of his Petite Sirah. For more information, visit www.psiloveyou.org.

Sims Brannon is a chef, world traveler, and wine collector. He received his formal culinary training in Paris, Bologna, and Naples, and has traveled and tasted in wine regions across Europe, North America, and the Southern Hemisphere. Based in California, he teaches cooking and wine-tasting classes to a loyal following of epicures. In addition to his contributions to Swirl, he writes regularly for the Ojai Valley News, Edible Ojai, initially.com, and other publications.

RECENT TASTINGS

I've recommended a selection of currently available Petite Sirahs. I think most wine-makers would agree with me that while they're certainly drinkable now, they'd all improve with age. The wines are in alphabetical order by maker, with one Petite Sirah dessert wine at the end. All are California wines.

1999 Edmeades Mendocino Eaglepoint Ranch Petite Sirah. Earthy flavors balanced by high fruit tones. Deep, rich color. Zinfandel and Syrah added for balance. A very smooth wine, ready to drink. \$25

2000 EOS Paso Robles Reserve Petite Sirah. Full-bodied wine with ripe, jammy fruit aromas, good notes of pepper and spice, and a delightful mocha finish. Drink now or hold for up to 10 years. \$25

1999 Field Stone Staten Family Reserve Alexander Valley Petite Sirah. Balanced tannins and fruit with exceptional aromatic structure. Made from grapes grown on 100-year-old vines, resulting in great depth, intensity, and complexity. Will only get better with age. \$30

2001 Foppiano Russian River Valley Bacigalupi Vineyard Petite Sirah. Berry fruits, spices, and light oak in a balanced wine. Smooth finish. \$18

1999 Guenoc Serpentine Meadow Guenoc Valley Petite Sirah. A deeply colored wine, with complex flavors of cherry, chocolate, coffee, and herbs. Excellent mouth-feel and finish. \$36

2000 Lolonis Orpheus Redwood Valley Petite Sirah. Spicy wine with lots of fruit. Well-balanced tannins. A blend of 80% Petite Sirah and 20% Valdiguie (also known as Napa Gamay, now a fairly rare varietal). \$35

2000 Parducci Petite Sirah. Ruby in color, full-bodied with lots of fruit. Smooth tannins and notes of chocolate. A blend of 77% Petite Sirah, 20% Grenache, 2% Carignane, and 1% Syrah. \$9

1998 Stag's Leap Napa Valley Petite Sirah. Deep, dark color, with a bold balance of tannin and acid. Lots of ripe fruit. A big wine with aging potential. \$32

2001 Trentadue Alexander Valley Petite Sirah. Big berry flavors with a good balance of alcohol, acid, and tannin. Spice and chocolate notes provide interest and character. \$22

1999 Guenoc Vintage Port. Jammy fruit backed up by chocolate, citrus, cassis, and spice. Perfect with Stilton cheese or a dark chocolate dessert. \$36

Prices shown are estimated retail and don't include any applicable sales tax or shipping fees; pricing and availability will vary.



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