

# History Stains Powerful Petite Sirah

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*Special to The Seattle Times*

Attention, all you who love a big, brawny bruiser of a red wine.

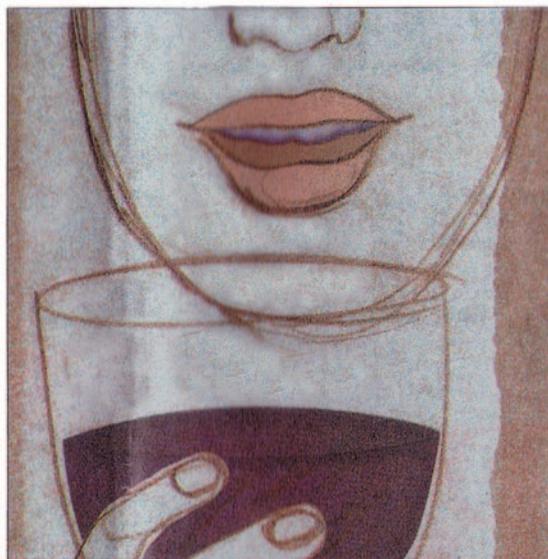
The PS I Love You Second Annual “Blue Tooth Tour” is coming our way. PS stands for petite sirah, and the blue tooth part is self-explanatory once you’ve seen (and tasted) the wines.

Petite sirah is a grape with a history. Its wines are a striking blue-black, as dark (and almost as thick) as blueberry jam. It has a powerful palate of mixed berries, mostly blueberries, blackberries and black cherries. It often has tooth-staining tannins, which can be difficult to manage, so that many of the wines have a rough, rustic finish – what one friend describes as “scrapey.”

The grape has fallen from favor in recent years, but for decades was widely known throughout California, where it was a vital component in hearty red blends. Much of the limited production of petite sirah today comes from those few remaining old vineyards.

It was only within the past few years that scientists determined exactly what it is, though it has been known for some time that what it is not syrah (although there is a parental connection).

Recent DNA testing has proved that most of petite sirah planted in California is identical to



MICHELE KUMATA / THE SEATTLE TIMES

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Durif, and obscure Rhone varietal that is a cross between syrah and an even more obscure grape named peloursin. Durif was the surname of the man credited with developing the hybrid. With that slim pedigree, California’s Rhone Rangers recently voted it into their club.

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was often a principal component in so-called “field blends – an old winemaking shortcut widely practiced at the time. A field blend might include up to a dozen different types of grapes: petite sirah, carignane, grenache, barbera, alicante, mourvedre, zinfandel, and so on.

Unlike today’s vineyards, with their neatly ordered rows of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, etc., nothing was kept separate back then. All the vines were mixed and harvested together and thrown into the vat together; hence the term field blend.

The first varietal wines labeled petite sirah were made by Concannon and Souvrain in the early 1960s, though Louis Martini had made a Duriff back in the 1940s, which may have been the same

thing. It was Dr. Carole Meredith, who also pioneered DNA testing of zinfandel, who finally sorted it all out a few years ago.

As she writes on the PS I Love You website, “Petite sirah in California is indeed the same as the French variety, Durif. We confirmed this by comparing the DNA profile of California petite sirah with authentic sample of Durif from the French national variety collection.”

Meredith goes on to explain that, typical of old vineyards, many petite sirah plantings are not 100 percent petite sirah, “just as not 100 percent of the vines in old zinfandel vineyards are not zinfandel.”

Nonetheless, the bureaucrats who control the federal wine labeling laws have decreed that as far as they are concerned, petite sirah and Durif are synonymous. So it be. And though you may occasionally see it misspelled as petit sirah, petite syrah or petit syrah, the correct spelling is petite sirah.

There is an interesting Puget Sound connection to the PS story. Jim Concannon, who maintains that he bottled the world’s first varietal

petite sirah (1961 vintage), sent along a newspaper clipping from October 1933 with a photo of a boxcar full of “fine wines, unmedicated and undiluted, from the famous Concannon vineyards.” These wines were the first to reach Seattle in anticipation of the repeal of Prohibition. The odds are that some of the wine in that boxcar was petite sirah.

Zin lovers will note that many of California’s richest, ripest zins contain a percentage of petite sirah, which adds color and tannin, as well as richer flavors of black cherry to the jammy raspberry taste of the zin. If you like your zins big and meaty, you will very likely find petite sirahs worth exploring.

Several dozen California wineries produce petite sirah, and a few – notably Concannon, Foppiano, Guenoc, and Bogle – make several versions. Prices start around \$10 and can go as high as \$50. When made in an over-the-top style, petite sirah can be dreadfully astringent, though it is rarely as hot and alcoholic as some zins and even syrahs. The best of the petites achieve a smooth balance that showcases their plush fruit, yet tames the tough tannins.

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As seen in . . .

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