
Petite sirahs are wines with wallop

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On Wine

The grapes are little, but the juice is a strongman of color, tannins, flavor. It's not for timid foods or folks. Some people like to live large - favoring extreme sports, powerful SUVs and sprawling McMansions. On them, subtlety is lost; delicacy, wasted. Only the gutsy and powerful will do.

They crave six-alarm chili, porterhouse steaks and oversized desserts. And more than anyone, they can appreciate petite sirah wines. Petite sirah is the Incredible Hulk of the wine world - immensely tannic, jammy and mouth-filling, often coarse and rugged yet occasionally elegant.

Big wines come from little grapes, and the "petite" here refers to the small, tight-clustered berries. The increased skin-to-juice ratio of tiny grape berries translates into more color, more tannins, more concentrated flavor, and more oomph in a wine.

Petite sirah is not the grape's real name. Its true title is "durif," an obscure French grape variety discovered by Francois Durif at the University of Montpellier in the 1880s. It was brought to America and for nearly a century was thought to be a clone of syrah. In 1996, DNA testing revealed that petite sirah was actually durif, a cross between the Rhone varietal syrah (or shiraz) and the lesser-known peloursin grape. Because of its susceptibility to mold and disease, petite sirah has nearly disappeared from the French landscape, but in dry, sunny California, it has survived... just barely.

Petite sirah was quite popular during Prohibition when it was shipped to home wine-makers on the East Coast. It was one of the main grapes used in Gallo's Hearty Burgundy during that wine's golden era of the 1960s and '70s. (It's now made mostly from zinfandel and carignan.) In 1975, there were 13,000 acres in California given to petite sirah, but the grape never quite made the transition into a varietal wine, and by 1990, its acreage had dwindled to 1,400.

In recent years, California wine-makers have taken interest in the curious grape variety, and its vineyard plantings have risen to about 4,000 acres.

Used judiciously in small doses as a blending grape, petite sirah can add complexity and depth to wimpy wines. On its own, this macho wine can flex its muscles.

Foppiano Vineyards owner Lou Foppiano has long been a champion of petite sirah and first bottled it in 1964. Today, around 60 wineries are making varietal petite sirah wines, but they're not easy to find. Some are sold only in wineries' tasting rooms. In September 2002, producers banded together to form an advocacy organization called "P.S. I love you" (<http://psiloveyou.org>).

Petite sirahs are not for everyone. They're not everyday wines. They're not for sipping as an aperitif. And they're not for weak appetites. They need foods robust enough to match petite sirah's heavyweight class - proteins, red meats, rich cheeses, and hearty tomato-based sauces. They're also long-lived wines that can benefit from cellar

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aging to mellow out the hard tannins.

Here are my impressions of some recent releases:

(The following wines reviewed are produced by members of P.S. I Love You)

2001 Concannon Petite Sirah, Central Coast

(\$11) Fruity, spicy, jammy with licorice-root flavors, balanced and structured with a black peppery finish.

2000 Bogle Petite Sirah, California (\$12) Dense and tannic, chocolaty with cherrylike fruit, spiced with black pepper and herbal tones.

2000 Foppiano Vineyards Petite Sirah, Sonoma County (\$20) Dense and raisiny, jammy and chewy with bright cherry/berry fruit flavors and a spicy, herbal character.

1999 Parducci Petite Sirah, California (\$9)

Thick, dense, tannic. . .blackberry, raisiny flavors.

