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# The “Little” Grape That Could

*Petite Sirah is on the rise in California.*

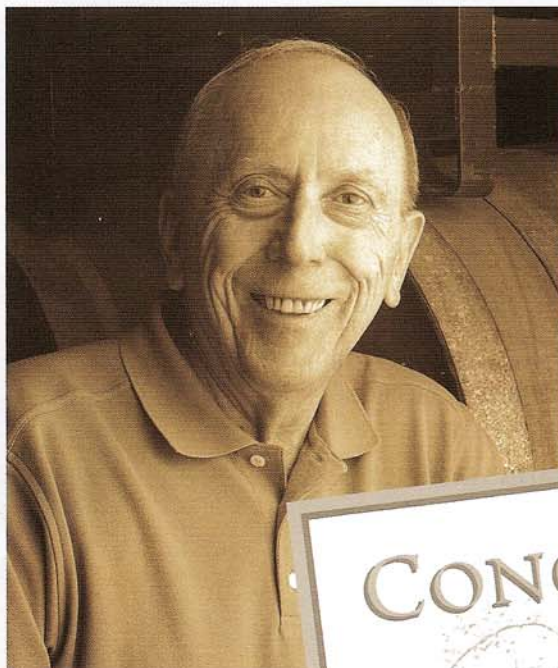
RICHARD PAUL HINKLE

It is instructive to observe and review for effectiveness — and occasionally chuckle at — promotional efforts within the wine business. The best effort to unite growers and producers within an appellation to assess its strengths and weaknesses, and then move the message to the media, has been the Carneros Quality Alliance. They held extensive tastings to determine if there were universal aspects to southernmost Napa and Sonoma Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs (I sat in on some of those tastings, and there were common points in the flavor profiles), and then did a fine job of getting that information out to the wine bibbing public.

ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates and Producers) has done an equally admirable job of letting folks know about California’s so-called “indigenous” varietal red (the varietal probably had its origins in Croatia) through an ongoing series of tastings and seminars. Pouring the wines as often as possible in a variety of venues works wonders at exposing the public to one’s wares.

Thus it was, a few years ago, that I had the opportunity to witness first hand one of the most stimulating of meet-and-greet tasting venues, traveling for almost a week with a group of Petite Sirah producers ... on a train. The brainstorm of marketing maven Jo Diaz, working closely with pioneering producers Louis Foppiano and Jim Concannon, the group is called “PS I Love You.” That they are doing a bang-up job at promoting the Petite may be evidenced by the fact that Petite Sirah acreage in California has swollen recently. “We’ve grown from a little over 4,000 acres in 2001 to more than 6,000 by the end of 2005,” says Dave Pramuk (Biale Vineyards), former president of PS I Love You. That figure will exceed 7,000 acres by the end of this year!

So far as we know, Petite Sirah has been planted in California since 1884. It once totaled more than 14,000 acres — it was the hearty backbone of a lot of homemade wines through Prohibition — and Petite hit a low of 1,400 acres in 1990. Today, you are



*Jim Concannon*

actually likely to see this rawboned, rustic beauty have its own heading on restaurant wine lists.

That Petite Sirah promotional train trip I tagged along on was the most original marketing tactic I have witnessed over my nearly four decades in the wine business. You see, PS I Love You hired a pair of railroad cars — one Pullman sleeper and one lavishly appointed domed dining car



— and used the latter to host tastings for 200 in three cities: Fort Worth, St. Louis and Chicago. It was dubbed “The Blue Tooth Tour,” for the variety’s tooth-tinting color intensity. “It was great,” says railroad buff Louis Foppiano, who uses a red Northern Pacific caboose as office space at his Healdsburg (Sonoma County) winery. “No airports or planes, no hotel rooms, no taxis, minimal food purchases, no schlepping our wine or point-of-sale stuff. Just a no-hassle jaunt northward on board our own — for five nights — luxury rail cars, with first class service and excellent on-board dining.” [Full disclosure: Louis and I skipped out early on the Wednesday evening tasting to walk eight blocks from

the train depot and watch the Cardinals whip the Dodgers at old Busch Stadium.]

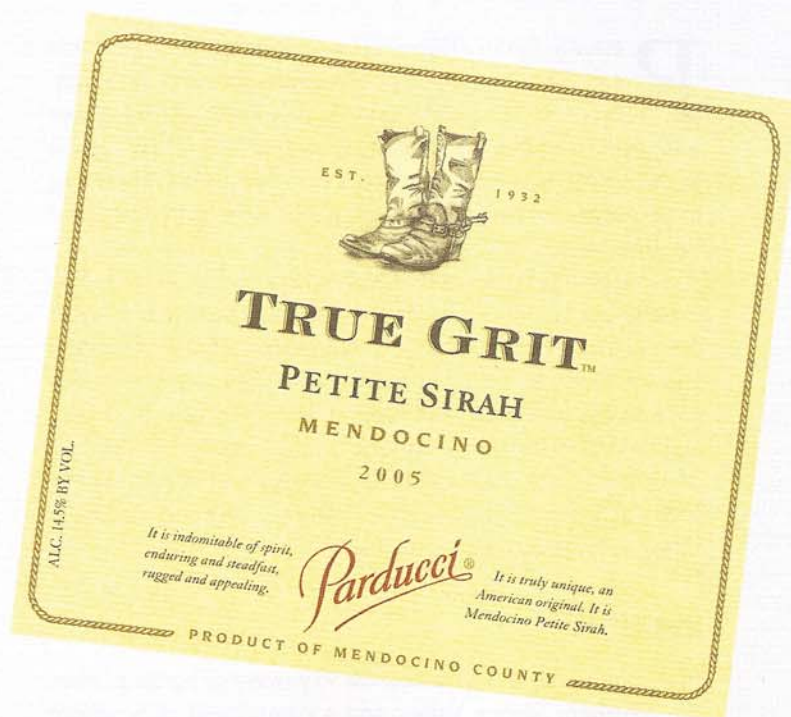
Each of the tastings was booked to capacity for the six Petite Sirah producers who signed on for the innovative tasting tour, and it's hard to imagine how it could have been pulled off any better. The atmosphere of leather, mahogany and top-class service showcased the current releases they were pouring and the reviews read something along the lines of "Standing Room Only." Literally and figuratively.

A half dozen years ago there were 65 wineries who produced Petite Sirah in this country; today there are more than 448 winemakers assaying this intriguing cross between Syrah and Peloursin (another French native). As you'll see in the tasting notes from the ten best to cross my tasting table in the last couple of months, these are wines worthy of your attention.

- **2005 CONCANNON CENTRAL COAST, \$16.** The black currant fruit simply jumps out at you, with black currant and plum leading the way. There is plenty of oak — bacon and duck fat (yum!) — to frame the fruit and push it forward. Sure, duck would do just fine with this. (There is also a Captain Joe's Reserve [\$30] from the same vintage, heartier in body, with iodine and soy sauce as an extra, added attraction.) Concannon was the first winery to make the Petite as a varietal wine, this from the 1961 vintage (released in 1964).
- **2005 FOPPIANO RUSSIAN RIVER, \$25.** All black fruit all the time. There is black currant and blackberry, there is pomegranate and blueberry, all wrapped up in a texture that is supple and alluring. The wine is agile enough for pizza, sophisticated enough for grilled game. Louis Foppiano is one of the leaders of the marketing group, and the winery hosts many of the group's gatherings on the south side of Healdsburg.
- **2005 PARDUCCI MENDOCINO "TRUE GRIT," \$30.** Opaque to the point of black, with sharp black pepper, pomegranate and dark chocolate flavors, and plenty of chewy tannin. This brusque beauty would be perfect with a cassoulet or any other sausage-based dish. Mendocino and its neighboring Lake County are well-suited to Petite Sirah.
- **2005 GUENOC LAKE COUNTY, \$20.** Velvet-thick texture and ripe Santa Rosa plum fruit are ballet-dancer light on their feet in this easy-to-drink rendition of the variety. (The winery also offers its *Langtry* label 2004 [\$40] that artfully adds blood orange, a hint of fig and a thick bacon-like hit of extra oak to the mix.)
- **2005 AUGUST BRIGGS WINERY LAKE COUNTY, \$35.** Dark and dense in color, with plenty of pomegranate and black pepper fruit up fruit, while there is a beguiling hint of blueberry in the finish that really grabs your attention and begs for the blackberry cobbler. (Briggs also offers a 2006 Napa Valley Petite [\$38] that is inky with blackberry and soy sauce, and very thick.)
- **2005 OAK GROVE CALIFORNIA RESERVE, \$8.** One of the real values of the tastings, with a lusty, full-throated mix

of leather, rhubarb, cranberry fruit and allspice zestiness that would do just fine with ... yes, here it comes, a roasted duck. What, exactly, were you expecting? The fruit is mostly Central Coast, the price is killer, and there are 3,000 cases to go around.

- **2005 EOS PASO ROBLES, ESTATE BOTTLED, \$18.** Blustery, with leather and ripe plum, raspberry and very soft black pepper. Tee this one up with any tomato-based dish, like a Salisbury steak. (Eos has three other Petites, the best of that lot being the 2004 "Cupa Grandis" [\$45], a meaty wine, with red raspberry accents. Think prime rib.)
- **2005 CLAYHOUSE PASO ROBLES ESTATE, \$23.** Lush with coffee, iodine, black ink, and fluid red currant that linger and tease. Pizza. Sharp cheddar, roaring fire, frosty eve.
- **2007 MCMANNIS CALIFORNIA, \$11.** Very aromatic, with cranberry sweetness and vanillin in the nose, backed up nicely with Bing cherry that lasts and lasts. Just what you want: good value, and 27,000 cases produced, so it's probably there at your local store.



- **2005 TWISTED OAK CALAVERAS COUNTY, \$24.** Fluid in the mouth, with cigar box spice and fruit ranging from cranberry to blackberry and cola. Owner/winemaker Jeff Stai says his wine goes best with a rib eye steak, French toast, or ... custard doughnuts! Gotta think about that.
- **2005 REDTREE CALIFORNIA, \$8.** Inky, with supple black currant, soy and raspberry. This is from Roy Cecchetti, and there were nearly 4,000 cases made of it. (He also has a *Line 39* 2006 from Lake County [\$16], vibrant with pomegranate and blackberry fruit. Okay, that's 11, but I'm ADD and that, somehow, makes it acceptable, or at least politically correct. Sue me.) ☹