

# Liquid Assets: Petite Sirah

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Some wine professionals, mostly scientists, think abstract terms such as “elegant,” “massive” or “exuberant” have no place in describing wine. But I’m not one of them. I reserve the right to use any word that seems convenient at the time to describe whatever grape-based phenolic soup I happen to be sipping.

Today’s wine is petite sirah, and today’s admittedly abstract — but very convenient — wine descriptor is rustic, although in a pinch I’d also use brawny or churlish. Hopefully by the time you finish reading, you’ll understand why. Brought over from France in the late 1800s, the variety was marketed as “petite syrah” because it supposedly had syrah-like character, but the berries were smaller, yielding more skin and less pulp. That translates to wine with more color and tannin and less water, so you end up with wine that dyes your teeth purple and can be so tannic that it seems positively gritty.

Its potency, and maybe its jagged edges, made it popular as a sacramental wine, and it was a core ingredient in many hearty California blends that were labeled “burgundy” in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s.

Until recently, petite sirah’s origins were sort of cloudy. According to Charles Olken, publisher of the venerable “Connoisseur’s Guide to California Wine,” “Most of us thought that it was [some variant of] syrah, then there did seem to be some evidence that it wasn’t. “But it wasn’t until Dr. Carole Meredith did the DNA work that we knew for sure.”

In 1999, Meredith tested the DNA of 53 vines from 40-some vineyards and found that 90 percent of them were of the “durif” variety, which was developed in southern France in the 1880s by Dr. Francois Durif when he crossed syrah with the less-respected peloursin grape. Durif was attempting to develop a variety less susceptible to mildew and created his namesake variety, with tight bunches of grapes that were susceptible to rot. That didn’t play well in France, but proved to be less of an issue in California’s arid zones, where it made rich reds that were hearty, if a little rough around the edges.

Petite sirah has always had deep color and lots of acid and tannin. Those are qualities that make it tremendously useful in blends — it can add the perfect amount of structure and color to a simple, fruity wine such as zinfandel, grenache or even a merlot. Alone, it can lack the sophistication of cabernet or its parent syrah, but sometimes makes up for it in open-armed country charm. Can it make great wine by itself? It depends on who you talk to.

Olken says his publication stopped tasting petite sirah varietal wines about 10 years ago because they just didn’t make the grade, “They’re too tannic, dry and rough, and there weren’t many to recommend that people put in their cellars. We stopped reviewing California sangiovese for the same reason.”

Olken also points to a steep 80 percent decline in petite sirah vineyard acreage in California between 1975 and 1990, especially in

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prime north coast regions, as another indicator of the grape's fortunes. I've seen a few inconsistent reports, but all agree that plantings of petite sirah have been on a strong upswing since 1990, and acres planted may have tripled.

Grapes, like anything else, go in and out of fashion. There's no doubt that big, brawny reds are hot, so it only makes sense that petite sirah has been more hot than not. Factor in its new rarity and all of a sudden you have a hot commodity. "Pet" is so hip that it has its own public relations organization, affectionately called P.S. I Love You. Jo Diaz, executive director of P.S. I Love You, says she firmly believes in petite sirah's future as a varietal wine grape, not just as a blending ingredient.

"There are a lot of growers who don't have it on a label yet who want to have their own petite sirah labels. I think it will be just as important in the American wine landscape as zinfandel has become. America is great for the underdog. We say 'We can grow that over here — nobody can tell me we can't!'"

That's a brash attitude that has been somewhat lacking in the American wine industry — one that's becoming more conservative by the day. Interestingly, it's backed by 44 of the most old-school, down-to-earth grape growers in the business. Can attitude triumph over breeding in this epic tug-of-war? I don't know, but I sure intend to watch.



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