

# From Syrah to Petite Sirah

By Paul White

Let's not beat around the old bushvine here. Durif is a bastard. I don't mean bastard as in a low down, filthy rotten, mean spirited, wife beating kind of way. Nor in a sense that durif's either a bastard to grow or a bastard to make. Nope, durif is simply a bastard in the original sense of the word. Durif is the fatherless child of a peasant vine named Peloursin. Or, rather, it was.

Recent DNA fingerprinting by noted ampelographer and geneticist Dr. Carol Meredith indicates that durif's former low birth, peasant-like status is probably as undeserved as it is incorrect. Not only is durif the progeny of nobility — with syrah suddenly liable for unpaid child support going back over a century — but treated with a bit of care and respect, it can easily out shiraz the biggest, boldest shirazes on the block.

Durif's tale is of epic proportions, with a bit of Cinderella, Clark Kent and prodigal son tossed in for good measure. Our story starts in the early 1880s at the University of Montpellier in Southern France. There a nurseryman named, Dr. Jacques Durif developed a new red grape variety intent on overcoming the powdery mildew epidemic currently devastating Europe's vines. While Dr. Durif succeeded in cross-pollinating peloursin, an obscure vine from Isere east of the Northern Rhone, unfortunately he had no way of knowing which male vine had sealed the pact. Eventually, the seed from this coupling grew into a new vine type, durif. But all Dr. Durif really managed to do was trade a resistance to powdery mildew for a thin skinned, tightly bunched grapevine that was prone to overcropping and susceptible to botrytis. French growers never really took to it, seeing little gain over

what they already had in the ground. Subsequently, durif never gained a foothold in France and is now almost extinct there.

Orphaned and fatherless, durif set off overseas looking for better prospects. Ultimately it found welcoming homes in both Australia and California, where it took root in very different ways and went on to create markedly different wine styles.

Entering the 'great melting pot' in 1884, durif cast off its past and gained a new identity in America as petite sirah (nicknamed 'pets' by longtime growers, it was also called petit sirah and petite syrah there). For over a century this name change created considerable confusion about petite sirah's relationship to durif. Solving that mystery eventually led to the discovery that durif was directly related to syrah.

When true syrah entered America in 1878 some called it petite syrah because of its small berry size. Appearing shortly after this, durif was retagged petite sirah, somewhat incongruously considering its grapes are usually larger than syrah's. In time Californian syrah was totally devastated by phylloxera during the 1890s, leaving sturdier petite sirah behind with ownership of both names.

As a mainstay workhorse grape petite sirah thrived in California, conquering massive territories from the hot interior Central Valley to Napa and Mendocino, through the cooler coastal areas of Monterey and Sonoma. Naturally adding spine, colour and flesh to zinfandel blends, it bulked out the majority of red jug wines during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Concannon and Souverain produced the first

100 per cent varietal labeling in 1964, and Foppiano can claim continuous production back to its founding in 1896.

But petite sirah was never considered to be to be up with the great varietals. Consequently, it had its ups and downs. From a high 14,000 acres in 1976, it had dropped to a tenth of that by 1990. The rise of the Rhone Rangers and the emerging appreciation for ‘old vine wines’ sparked petite sirah’s stunning rebound back up to its current 4,000 acres. In the process of chasing down naturally low-yielding, old stands of zinfandel and mataro, producers soon discovered many of these vineyards were dominated by old vine ‘Pet’. Petite Sirah suddenly became a serious wine in its own right. Soon after, people started wondering what it really was and where it came from?

Unlike in Australia, the early pioneers of California wine were predominantly southern Europeans. Following traditional Mediterranean viticultural practices, they often interplanted zinfandel, carignane, mourvedre, grenache, peloursin, petit sirah, durif, and other grapes, side by side, within the same vineyard. The logic being that these ‘field blends’ were destined for co-fermentation in the same vat as generic ‘hearty burgundy.’ So they might just as well be grown together from the start.

The surviving field blends that populated California’s ‘old vine’ stock made petite sirah’s identification tricky. Virtually identical to peloursin, it took Dr. Meredith’s DNA testing to sort out that petite sirah was identical to durif and that 10 per cent of petite sirah was actually peloursin. Where previous researchers had speculated peloursin might have been diddled by any of the other field blend grapes, Meredith solidly nailed down syrah as the only possible father. Redeemed as a noble grape, petite sirah’s future was secured.

Ironically Australia, being much more Anglo-Saxon about things, never lost track of durif. Planted tidily on its own in single vineyards, it was saddled up as a work horse from its earliest entry

into the country. Liking it as dry as it comes, durif naturally gravitated to the hot interior of Victoria, becoming one of the primary port grapes of Rutherglen. Although prized for the chunky tannins, high alcohol and deep colour it lent to blending, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century durif wasn’t taken any more seriously as a quality varietal in Australia, than it was in America. By 1990 production sat on 108 tonnes, half of which was thought to be peloursin. Apart from a smattering of supporters in Hunter, Griffith and King Valley, Rutherglen has been the prime driver behind durif’s forward progression.

Durif doesn’t pussy foot around. Because it’s relatively small berry size creates a higher ratio of pulp to skin surface (where tannins and flavours live), durif is ALWAYS inky dark, full flavoured, highly tannic, ultra-butcher stuff.

Rarely subtle, flavours and aromas can offer a rich melange of fresh, cooked and dried fruit characters: black cherries, blackberries and mulberries; plums to prunes; dates, figs, and raisins. Add in barrel derived shades of cinnamon, ginger, licorice, treacle, molasses, mocha, coffee, bitter chocolate and caramel, highlighted by honeyed, floral, violet, dried herb and black pepper’ overtones, and you’ll start getting at its essence.

Both asset and liability, durif’s massive tannic structure needs to be cajoled, carefully stroked and gently pressed to tame it into a humanly acceptable form. Powdery at its finest, more often durif’s tannins inhabit the chewier, grippier, grittier end of the scale. Which is why durifs will easily age for a decade or two. For those of us with shortened attention spans and an aversion to pain, our only recourse to chunkier styles is a massive hunk of meat.

Between truckloads of fruit and a mother lode of tannins, durifs start at full bodied and get progressively bigger. If there’s criticism to be made it’s that textures can be a wee bit too alcohol driven at times, tending toward an oily, mineral, glycerine laden viscosity and a touch of bitter alcohol astringency on the finish.

Some argue durif does best in the cooler parts of very hot regions and hotter parts of temperate regions: where cabernet raisins, durif thrives. Cooler climate styles are generally more florally perfumed with violets, pepper and berries a common descriptive. Finer tannined, cleaner textured and lower in alcohol (13-13.5 per cent), they have a greater range of possibilities at table. Although they can be bigger, the majority of Californian wines fit this model.

Down under, proportions get ratcheted up a couple of notches. There, the hotter durif grows, the better. Andrew Smith of Warrabilla, opts for planting on the drier side of Rutherglen, where rainfall ranges between 12-20 inches annually, reckoning the 28 inches on the other side is just too dangerous: “We would typically ripen 2 weeks prior, looking for very ripe characters to get away from the hard green tannins that appear at even ‘normal ripeness’ ie 14.5 Baume. Our best durifs have been megaripe... the 2001 Reserve 16.2 per cent alc, The 2002 17 per cent alc. and the Parola’s 17.5 per cent.”

These, er... “bigger” Rutherglen styles border on what is best described as naturally unfortified, ultra-dry port. Sun drenched, super dried blackfruits rocket their way through dense textures, laden with fiery alcohol and stacks of tannins. To say the least, these can kick sand in the face of the biggest shirazes.

But even within Rutherglen different schools of thought co-exist. The old traditionalists carry on with early-Australian Old World practices. Their emphasis is on fruit, rich full bodied textures and massive tannins for long term keeping. Stanton & Killeen, Morris, Campbell and Warrabilla Wines all come to mind here. Others like All Saints, Mount Prior and Gapstead take a more modern approach. They are using oak barrels or gentle pressing to smooth out durif’s rougher edges, doing their best to dress it with as much elegance as it will allow them.

Currently durif has all the hallmarks of a cult wine waiting in the wings. With Rutherglen lining up all its ducks, more than 60 California wineries

producing varietal Petite Sirah and the new P S I Love You ([www.psiloveyou.org](http://www.psiloveyou.org)) promotional group set to carry this message to a greater audience, this son of shiraz is ready to fly.

Durif and food — Meat, meat and more meat



[www.psiloveyou.org](http://www.psiloveyou.org)