

# The History of Petite Sirah in California

(Part I ~ From the 1870's to 1930's)

According to Wine Industry Historian  
Charles Sullivan<sup>1</sup>.

Historically, the Petite Sirah story is really very complicated by what we know, and by what we don't know. There are huge gaps when it's virtually impossible to know what was going on, though we can make logical inferences.

**What we know** - Durif is a cross between the mother (Peloursin) and the father (Syrah), as discovered by Dr. Carole Meredith. [According to the late wine reviewer Roy Andries de Groot, "Petite Sirah is also called, along the Rhône and in other parts of France, Schiraz, Sirac, Syrac, Hirnin Noir, Entournerien, Serine, Serenne." <sup>2</sup>]

In California vineyards, Petite Sirah is a "Stealth Grape." From the late 1890's to the 1920's, Petite Sirah had a number of named varieties, and what we called the grape might not have been the actual variety. There are many different spelling of "Sirah." Eugene Hilgard [the first professor of Viticulture and the founding Dean of Agriculture at the University of California, Berkeley] has written Sirah with a "y" (Syrah), double "r"s (Syrrah), an "a" (Sira), and an "ah" (Sirah).

Durif got here in the late 1870's, after having been developed by "a French amateur botanist, Dr. François Durif."<sup>3</sup> It came from Isère, France.

Syrah also came to the U.S. in 1870. In the 1880's, James Drummond declared that Syrah was infected by Phylloxera. It then completely disappeared. No Syrah survived Phylloxera. There's no evidence of Syrah after 1890's. 1920's... none. 1930's... none. Syrah is NOT part of the California wine story before 1940's and the 1950's, but Petite Sirah played a major role.

As early as the late 1870's, some Californians were experimenting with disease resistant rootstock. Nearly 80 to 85 percent of the vineyards were in the coastal regions. In the 1880's, *Vitis rupestris* and *Vitis riparia* did really well, and some Petite Sirah vineyards survived Phylloxera. ["Foppiano's survived," states Louis J. Foppiano.]

In 1884, Charles **McKeever** planted vines in Mission San Jose (the East Bay). He was a dilettante who planted it in Linda Vista as an experiment. We have good reason to believe that it was Durif, based on everything that was recorded about the varietal planting. He referred to those vines as Petite Sirah, and in a few years, people were also calling it Petite Sirah.

Henry W. Crabb, Napa proprietor of To Kalon Vineyards went to the East Bay, looked at **McKeever's** wine and said, "This is very good, it's a heavy yielder, it's got great color," and he brought it to Napa Valley.

From 1893 to 1897, some Californians were experimenting with disease resistant rootstock. The industry over expanded and created a glut, which resulted in the following:

- Prices were forced down
- There was a general economic and industrial depression simultaneously happening
- Phylloxera was spreading

From 1897 to 1905 – there was an explosion of plantings in South Santa Clara Valley, the Cucamonga and Lodi areas, Mendocino County. A replanting of vineyards also happened in 1895 in Sonoma County, which then had many, black stumps left standing from Phylloxera. Just about everything was wiped out. In 1903 to 1905, it was the most popular grape of replanting... Petite Sirah, Durif, Peloursin... First exclaimed in 1920, Professor Bennett declared, "No question about what we've got here... rows of Petite Sirah and Durif – the same vine!"

**What we don't know** - The press simply stopped talking about Petite Sirah from 1900 to 1930, and I can only find 30 articles about Petite for that entire time. Talk just stopped, and by the end of depression, there was a rebirth of interest in planting.

**MORE TO FOLLOW:** Taken from the audio transcript at the Second Annual Petite Sirah Noble Symposium, organized and hosted by Foppiano Vineyard



<sup>1</sup>. Twenty-five years ago, Leon Adams, the dean of California wine writers, named Charles L. Sullivan "the modern historian of wine in California." Among Sullivan's books are *A Companion to California Wine: An Encyclopedia of Wine and Winemaking from Mission Period to the Present*, and his newly released *Zinfandel, A History of a Grape and its Wine*.

<sup>2</sup>. The Wines of California, The Pacific Northwest and New York, Roy Andries de Groot, page 154.

<sup>3</sup>. The Wines of California, The Pacific Northwest and New York, Roy Andries de Groot, page 155.