

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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## Honoring Petite Sirah

Whenever I evaluate a range of Petite Sirahs, a number of friends have cracks they think are funny.

Such as, "So when do you go in for an enamel replacement?" Or, "Did you take Tylenol with Codeine before hand?" And "Let me know when you can taste food again."

Hey, it's not so bad, I often say, and then they notice the color of my teeth and chapped lips. You would think that with wine this dark and challenging to the palate that it would be a grape on the decline.

Thankfully, the opposite is true. There are as many Petite Sirahs on the market today as there ever have been, maybe more, and they are better than ever.

As I evaluated 46 of these brutes two weeks ago at the *San Francisco Chronicle* wine competition in Cloverdale, I began to think of ways to write about my experience. There was a fleeting thought of mentioning that my tongue had been cauterized. Or that some wine maker with a sense of humor would add a new label to the back of his bottle that said, "Warning: Toxic Substance Inside," or "Do Not Drink Until 2015."

In fact, even the trade group that supports this often-overlooked grape knows that there is no avoiding the fact that if you consume a young Petite Sirah the chances are there will be at least some physical change in your physiognomy: your mouth will change hue.

The association of wineries is called P.S. I Love You. Tomorrow it begins a tour of the nation called the Blue Tooth Tour. (See story to the right.) And what is amazing is that Petite Sirah is carving out a niche all its own with dedicated wine lovers who appear to be as passionate as are the thousands of Zinfandel fanatics who recently filled a huge hall at San Francisco's Fort Mason for the annual ZAP-fest.

The radical difference between the two wines is that most Zin lovers know the object of their affection is a wine that doesn't age particularly gracefully. But Petite Sirah almost demands a decade, and often more. (I have examples in my cellar from the 1970s and even earlier that are still superb drinking.)

At the Chronicle competition, I was surprised to see as many as 46 of these monsters. But a spokes-woman for PSILY said that Petite Sirah has been slowly gaining ground with consumers for the last decade, and that only a bit of unnecessary name-calling about its brooding nature has tarnished its image.

Oh, true, the tooth-staining upstart can be a fearsome foe in the face of white-teeth campaigns, and at one point a panel at a long-ago wine competition, having just completed a round of these things, called themselves the Purple Tongue Gang, a *nom de vin* that followed them into the next year.

But PS has a *raison d'être*, and

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### Promoting P.S.

In 2002 a tiny group of passionate red wine lovers got together to form P.S. I Love You. Today it's a full-fledged group with 40 members, and a slogan for a promotional tour: Wines you can sink your teeth into.

In the group are 15 people willing to hop aboard a motor home and travel from California to Texas, then do the same sort of thing on the eastern seaboard. The twin tours will make 13 stops. At each, they will pour wine for the trade and media.

And they'll perform serious proselytization on the benefits of Petite Sirah.

Appropriately enough, the tour starts tomorrow—the day before Valentine's Day—in San Francisco. The first half of the tour ends Feb. 24 in Houston, then starts up again March 22 in Boston and ends March 30 in Miami.

Despite denture danger, the tastings are by invitation only, and that's for a reason: the press and retailers want in.

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## Petite Sirah

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mainly it is to pair with *boeuf*, preferably on the hoof. When someone prepares a char-grilled chunk of steak dark on the outside, and serves it with a dollop of butter or even some sautéed onions and/or mushrooms, I look at Petite Sirah as a perfect structural associate.

And although I prefer my Petite Sirahs about a decade old, to allow some of the tannins time to resolve, I have been known to down 'em younger, decanting them as long as two hours ahead of the meal, the aim being to domesticate the wine from its feral state, however little two hours actually does for such a beast.

“So he’s actually suggesting we try this thing?” I can hear some of your bleating. Indeed, I am and with gusto, since the flavors of a solidly made Petite Sirah are (as I have often stated) unique and worth a try—with the right kind of foods.

The last admonition ought not to have been said, but I said it. Fact is, you could try a young Petite Sirah with a soufflé. The result would be that you would not taste much of the food, the wine being so bold and full that all you’d be left with is a mouth full o’ tannin. Astringency city.

What I discovered from the Chronicle judging is that warm-climate fruit seems to be just as

interesting as cool-climate fruit with this variety. In fact some of the best wines in the event were from places that long have suffered from being referred to by wine snobs the way Gertrude Stein once referred to Oakland.

But as growers figure out how to add the nutrients to the soil that Petite Sirah needs, the resulting wines are remarkably structured, even if some the alcohol levels are pushing the stratosphere.

Coarse and crude they may be, but why is that so bad now and then? Grab some tooth whitener and join in the fun.

## The Meaning of a Brand

When one winery buys another, the degree to which the acquired entity changes depends a great deal on the reason it was bought.

Years ago when Brown-Forman acquired Jekel Vineyards in Monterey County, among the reasons it did so was that wine maker Rick Boyer was one of the best in the business.

It also liked the estate vineyards Jekel had developed, including the Sanctuary property below a bluff that protected the vines from powerful afternoon winds.

Moreover, Jekel was a niche brand that offered a distinctively different sort of wine, with a charm born of the soils of Monterey County.

There were different reasons for the acquisitions of Arrowood and Byron (by Robert Mondavi), Louis M. Martini (by Gallo), Callaway by Allied Domecq, and Wild Horse (by Geyser Peak).

And the result of those deals has

led inevitably to changes in the way each of the brands now is viewed.

In most (but not all) cases, the style of the wine was maintained. In some cases, radical changes were made, ostensibly driven by financial considerations.

Financial considerations seem to be the prime motive behind last week’s closing of Jekel and the termination of 47 employees, including the talented Boyer.

It has been reported that Jekel may now use fruit from other areas

(such as Lake County), as well as other facilities for making the Jekel wines.

Clearly, when Jekel was bought, the aim was to keep it alive as a unique and stylistic entity. Clearly, economics now dictate that Jekel become a brand with precious little or no regional identity.

Beyond the sad personal issue involved in such upheaval, I am equally sad that yet another brand now will be simply the product of blending.

## Wine of the Week

**Guigal Côtes-du-Rhône Rosé (\$12):** Fresh, sprightly, floral aroma of berry and cherry and an attractive soft yet totally dry mouth feel. Even though this sort of wine is best as a thirst-quencher in hot weather, it’s also superb with a wide variety of foods, such as grilled seafood. Often discounted below \$10. Imported by Ex Cellars.

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted at the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition on Jan. 29.

## Exceptional

2000 **Perry Creek** Petite Sirah, El Dorado, “Cellar Select” (\$28): Pepper and spice with huge dark fruit aroma and flavors; dry and tannic, but lovely finish. Should age well at least a decade.

2000 **Fenestra** Petite Sirah, Lodi (\$17): Strong Rhône qualities with pepper, violets and clove; blackberry and a classic balance of fruit and tannin. Really long-lived.

2001 **Granite Springs** Petite Sirah, Fair Play (\$20): Graceful aroma of violet/cranberry fruit with pepper and spice elements, and a rich, fruit-filled finish that’s still tight and hard. Needs at least four more years; could live a decade.

2000 **Guenoc** Petite Sirah, North Coast (\$18.50): Clove, hints of Chinese five-spice, pepper and jam; black fruits, and a finish that reminded me of violets. Another

stunning wine from this PS specialist. Age at least five years.

2001 **Foppiano** Petite Sirah, Russian River Valley, “Bacigalupi” (\$17.50): Some oak for complexity, then violets and clove/pepper; an almost sweet aftertaste. Yet the wine is rock hard so needs a decade or more.

## Very Highly Recommended

2001 **Lava Cap** Petite Sirah, Sierra Foothills, Granite Hill Reserve (\$30): Inky black with a nice violet/black fruit aroma. Hard at the moment, but still awfully young. Needs at least five years.

2002 **Clay Station** Petite Sirah, Lodi (\$20): Violet and plum aroma with a soft, juicy entry. Lower acid is a bonus, a wine that may be consumed a bit younger. Still fairly rich and a bit tannic.

2001 **Eaglepoint** Petite Sirah, Mendocino (\$24): More green/

herbal notes than in many here, but with a fascinating complexity and richness in the finish. Tannic and unyielding; aeration seemed to help it. Age about a decade.

2002 **Amphora** Petite Sirah, Dry Creek Valley, “Mounts” (\$30): Inky, dense, and impressive plum and black fruit aroma, but higher tannins. Not much subtlety here, just a nicely structured yet surprisingly easy-to-like early drinking red. Serve with cheese.

2000 **Philip Staley** Petite Sirah, Dry Creek Valley, “Somers” (\$22): Rhône-ish aroma, complex and racy. Needs a few years to tame the coarseness.

2001 **Viña Robles** Petite Sirah, Paso Robles (\$24): American oak alongside rich violet/plum fruit. Dry and quite hard. Needs time.

## ‘Forget Terroir: It’s a Great Vintage’

The heat wave that ravaged Europe in 2003 left thousands dead and had a disruptive effect on many areas of agriculture.

Because of the extraordinary heat, grapevines did rather well in many areas, so well in fact that record sugar levels were recorded in numerous areas, and reports now filtering out of some wine regions indicate that wines with richness not seen in decades, if ever, are now being readied for market.

Though we won’t see the best reds of Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Rhône, Rioja or vintage Port for some time, we will get a glimpse of the white wines as they begin to hit the U.S. market in the coming days.

From all accounts many of these wines are being touted as great, or even greater than that.

But one thing lurks in the back of my brain: among the key aspects to all great wine, at least historically, and the essence of why we prize “estate” wines as we do, are the regional characteristics we ascribe to them.

The terroir components inherent in a great Sancerre, Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape, or Auslese are nuances of this and that. The great Sancerre has a chalky minerality, the Rhône a racy underbrush component, the Riesling a lime/slate thing.

We also know that too much warmth for vines can wipe out this

terroir component and leave a wine hollow, eviscerated of terroir.

I cherish vines that struggle, and we know they yield wines of character, acid—wines that last and improve over time. I fear that the excessive heat of ’03 may make for “great” wine that has no soul.

### Bargain of the Week

2002 **Jekel** Riesling, Monterey (\$9) -- Baked apple, mineral/slate and tangerine aroma; soft, slightly sweet entry, but handsome crisp finish for pairing with Asian foods. A delightful and refreshing wine from Rick Boyer.