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## Oeno-file: Tracing a family tree ...er, vine

By MARY EWING MULLIGAN

If you could read every wine column in America this holiday weekend, you'd probably find more than a few on the topic of Zinfandel, because the Zinfandel grape is considered America's own wine-grape variety. It didn't originate here, but this is where it became famous. Just like Petite Sirah.

Like what?! If that name sounds unfamiliar, it's not surprising. The Petite Sirah grape isn't nearly as famous as Zinfandel, although it, too, is something of an American phenomenon, and the spicy red wines made from it qualify as true Americana.

Both Zinfandel and Petite Sirah are clearly European varieties - they belong to the European species *Vitis vinifera* - but their precise origins were once a mystery. After years of speculation that Zinfandel might be an Italian variety, grapevine geneticists finally traced Zin back to Croatia, where it is known as Crljenak kastelanski.

Petite Sirah's story is a bit more complicated. In the 1970s, the world expert on grapevines declared it to be Durif, an obscure French variety. But DNA testing in the 1990s proved that vines known as Petite Sirah in California are actually four different varieties, one of which is Durif. The others are Syrah, an obscure French grape called Peloursin and a Durif-Peloursin cross.

Despite this confusion, a few dedicated winemakers continue to make dark, full-bodied Petite Sirah wines. These have a remarkable ability to age, and when they're young, they benefit from aeration and food pairings. Many of them have an intriguing aroma and flavor of black pepper, along with dark, plummy fruit. You can find several brands of California Petite Sirah in New York and, being outside the mainstream, they are good values. They include Concannon (\$13), Parducci (\$12), Kempton Clark (\$10), Bogle (\$13), Rosenblum Cellars (\$24) and Girard (\$28). One other winery, Foppiano, is a Petite Sirah specialist, making three different bottlings: a basic Petite Sirah and a single-vineyard wine, both for \$19.50, and a Reserve for about \$24. If you like robust reds, any of these wines would be delicious with burgers, steak or other grilled foods that you might be enjoying this weekend.

### TIP OF THE WEEK

Sticking to the same old varietal wines all the time is a recipe for boredom. Experiment with wines you've never heard of. All you risk is the price of one bottle.

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