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by Charles Olken

Some Petite Sirahs finally going light on tannin

MY general policy is to ignore Petite Sirah. I haven't always turned a blind eye to the grape, but as I have not liked many Petites over the years I decided to pay attention to grapes I like better.

Petite Sirah, at least in its past incarnations, is often more tannic than I believe is useful or wise. All too rarely does it come with sufficient fruit to make the wines drinkable when young or enjoyable with long aging.

Still, there have always been versions of Petite that have risen above the grape's inherent tendency toward blunt toughness and too-dry fruit.

So I recently ventured forth into Petite Sirah-land, in the hope that newer farming techniques and modern vinification would lend some much needed tameness to the grape.

Now, having chewed my way through mountains of tannin, I can report that Petite Sirah generally remains true to its strengths of muscle, concentrated color and ageworthiness. As a result, it often remains true to its major weakness, as well — the shortage of fruit depth needed to produce the balance I prefer in wines.

I also ran into two other trends, both of which can be viewed as positive. A few wineries, but not enough for my taste, are doing very fine work in allowing "strength" to remain in the wine without overshadowing the fruit. And for those who are fans of sinew, there are still plenty of Petites around to fulfill their desires. It may not be a wine for all tastes, but it will never be accused of lacking personality.

The grape produces wines with plenty of depth but not always a lot of the sweet fruit of Pinot Noir or Merlot, or the piquant, ripe berry fruit of Zinfandel. Its character is something like a muscular Syrah, which is not surprising because Syrah is one of its parents, the other being the almost unknown grape Peloursin.

Because it is a ripe but very dry wine and because it has plenty of tannin in its makeup, Petite Sirah goes best with straightforwardly prepared chunks of red meat. It does not go well with anything that has the least bit of sweetness such as Italian red-sauced foods, basted pork roasts and chops or barbecue sauces. Those latter items make Petite Sirah taste as dry as dust. Better that you should stick to beef or lamb hot of the grill with no sweetness in the seasonings.

P.S. I Love You memeber wines reviewed...

2002 Concannon, Selected Vineyards, Central Coast, \$12. Mostly Petite Sirah in makeup, but with 8 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 8 percent of other grapes, this one stands out in the crowd of Petite Sirah offerings because it avoids the muscle of the grape and turns out to be surprisingly accessible. Its comparatively modest tannins firm without toughening, and the wine is fit with bright, raspberry-like fruitiness. Its price is right, and if hardly a wine of bombast, it sports enough depth and mildly spicy complexity to make its way into the one-star ranks.

2000 Guenoc, North Coast, \$21. Several Guenoc Petite Sirahs are around these days, and this is my choice of the lot. It may be a little less complex than the winery's expensive "Serpentine Meadow Reserve" bottlings, but it is easier to like. It delivers direct, ripe, bold Petite Sirah aromas, and its gift of a soft, ripe palatefeel early on leads to a firmer but still accessible finish marked by smoother tannins than are the norm for Petite. One might find more sinew and drama elsewhere, but in Petite Sirah, sinew is not always a virtue.

2002 Rosenblum, Pickett Road, Napa Valley, \$24. Whether by virtue of vineyard or Rosenblum's attentive, fruit-forward winemaking, this rich and deeply filled wine establishes itself as one of the more attractive Petite Sirahs that you will find out there in the marketplace. From its dense, berry-laden aromas to its lush, mouthfilling flavors, it offers deep fruit, lots of sweet and creamy oak, and a surprising sense of polish that is infrequently found with this varietal. It closes with enough astringency to remind that it is indeed Petite Sirah, but its depth and insistent fruit mark it as a guaranteed bet for many years of further growth.

Contributing writer and Alameda resident Charles E. Olken writes the Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine, a monthly newsletter. You can obtain a sample copy of his guide by sending your name and address to CGCW, P.O. Box V, Alameda, CA, 94501 or by e-mailing CGCW@aol.com. The Web site is www.cgcw.com

