

# The Deliciously Simple End To a Complicated Story

A Search for Petite Sirah Is Worth Some Effort; Bitterness and Berries

**Dorothy Gaiter & John Brecher**

*Tastings*

Last week, we wrote about Shiraz from Australia, which is the same grape as Syrah from the U.S., which is the grape used in many wines from the Rhone Valley of France. This column is about Petite Sirah, which is sometimes called Petite Syrah but is different from Syrah. Sigh. We understand that the world of wine can be a complicated place. But it's important to get beyond all of the confusing stuff and focus on what matters: taste. This is what matters: "Bursting with peppery, tasty fruit. Blackberries and cherries and a very nice, dry finish. Exuberant fruit and an interesting herbal bitterness. Intense fruit from beginning to end, with a nice little bite. It's like all the berries are there. The complete package."

## An 'Agreeable' Wine

This is Petite Sirah. It's a wine with an interesting and confusing history. Papers have been written about its history and its relationship to various grapes, including one called Durif. If you've ever had a "California Burgundy" — and, really, who hasn't, whether we admit it or not — it was probably made at least partly from Petite Sirah. It's a big, dark, tannic wine that lends itself well to a fairly simple table wine. One of our favorite quotes about Petite Sirah comes from "American Wines," a 1941 book by Frank Schoonmaker and Tom Marvel, who said it "can yield about as agreeable an undistinguished wine as the authors have ever drunk." Talk about damning with faint praise!

In fact, though, in the hands of vintners who want to make something special, Petite Sirah can be a distinctive, great cold-weather wine that is worth looking for. Good ones have a very attractive, dark purple color that sometimes seems to have little sparkling highlights and other times tends toward pitch black. They're often tannic, dry, filled with blackberry-like fruit and almost chewy, with tastes of pepper. But here's the best part: Because they are generally made in smaller quantities only by committed winemakers

— unlike Merlot, few wineries expect to make their fortune on Petite Sirah — each wine tends to be distinctive. That's one reason we had so much fun in this blind tasting.

## Black Pepper Explosions

We went to quite a few stores to pick up enough, but, even then, didn't see some of our favorites from the past. The ones we found, though, gave us a marvelous tour of such an interesting grape. One of our very favorites was from Rosenblum, which is best known for its zesty Zinfandels. Our notes: "Dark and rich-looking, with a great nose of fruit, tobacco and cedar. Intense blackberries and a bit chewy, with the most amazing little explosions of black pepper in the mouth." We noticed that this wine was really staining our glass and here's a surprise: As the night wore on, we kept refilling our tasting glasses with this wine and kept coming back to it, which is pretty unusual in our tastings. To find a wine that is at once filled with distinctive character and yet so very easy to drink is a treat.

Our other favorite, the one with the tasting notes above that was bursting with fruit, was from a reliable name, Guenoc, whose Petite Sirah has been among our favorites in the past as well. The price: \$17, a great deal for such a special wine.

As with many distinctive wines, it will take a little bit of a search to find a Petite Sirah amid all of the more popular wines at your local store. Take the time. It's worth it. *(article continued on page 2)*



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# The Dow Jones Petite Sirah Index

In a blind tasting of American Petite Sirah, these were our favorites, but most Petite Sirah is made in small quantities, so you might see a whole different selection in your wine shop, where Petite Sirah is often grouped with American Syrah. These are great with steak, lamb and hearty winter food.

*PS I Love You members reviewed are the following:*

VINEYARD/VINTAGE	PRICE	RATING	TASTERS' COMMENTS
<b>Guenoc &amp; Langtry Estate Vineyards &amp; Winery 1999 (North Coast)</b>	\$17.00	Very Good/Delicious <b>Best of tasting (tie) and best value.</b>	The complete package: exuberant, dark fruit and some intensity from beginning to end. A consistent favorite.
<b>Rosenblum Cellars 'Pickett Road' 2001 (Napa Valley)</b>	\$21.99	Very Good/Delicious <b>Best of tasting (tie).</b>	Distinctive yet easy to drink. Dark and rich, with great fruit, hints of tobacco and little explosions of pepper throughout. Classy.
<b>Concannon Vineyard 2001 (Central Coast)</b>	\$12.99	Very Good	Inky. A real powerhouse — chewy, peppery, spicy and intense, with some herbs, too. Yowee.
<b>Foppiano Vineyards 2001 (Paso Robles)</b>	\$15.99	Very Good	Nose of blackberries and black pepper. Interesting and different, filled with tannins and so dry it dries out our mouths. A real experience.



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