The International Wine Review is a new online wine publication for wine distributors, retailers, restaurants, hotels, sommeliers, wine media, practicing wine professionals, and others deeply involved in wine.

The IWR publishes in-depth reports on selected premium grape varieties from around the world. The reports offer:

- expert tasting notes and ratings for the best wines categorized by three tiers: entry level, mid level, and high end wines
- an examination of the various styles of wine being made analyses of the impact of site, grape growing and winemaking
- advice and recommendations regarding marketing and sales

The IWR’s Report #1 on “California’s Petite Sirahs” is being sent to you in hard copy with our compliments.

Look for these future reports:

- Grenache-based wines of Spain, Australia, France, and other regions
- Touriga Nacional and the wines of Portugal
- Pinot Grigio-Pinot Gris
- California Syrahs
- Malbecs from Argentina, Cahors, and elsewhere
- Grüner Veltliner

Producers, importers, and distributors who wish to have their wines included in future tastings are invited to contact the publishers at info@iwinereview.com

The publishers welcome feedback and recommendations from readers on improving the content and usefulness of these reports.

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Report #1  California’s Petite Sirah

by:  Mike Potashnik and Jay Youmans MW
with assistance from Steve Weissman

Introduction

This first International Wine Review Report focuses on California Petite Sirah. Despite being a work horse grape in many blends in California, playing a supporting role for many great Zinfandels, bolstering some great Cabernet Sauvignons, and making some phenomenal wines on its own, Petite Sirah is not well known and continues to be one of the most underrated grapes grown in California.

There are currently 5,500 acres in California planted with Petite Sirah, tiny by comparison with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and other major grape varieties. Despite this, there are 248 producers of Petite Sirah in California and a growing following of enthusiastic consumers. The grape is also fiercely beloved by many winemakers who belong to a society that promotes Petite Sirah known as “PS I Love You.”

Petite Sirah has maintained a loyal cult following over the years, owing to the enthusiastic support of producers such as Foppiano, Concannon, Stag’s Leap, and Bogle, to name but a few. However, Petite Sirah is generally under the radar screen of the wine trade and the serious wine enthusiast. It for this reason the IWR Tasting Panel set out to assess the quality of a select group of Petite Sirahs currently being produced in California. Our goal was also to identify the styles of Petite Sirah being produced, assess the quality-price ratios, and to provide readers an overview of the grape that will help enhance its appreciation.

The IWR Tasting

Our tasting included samples of 35 Petite Sirahs selected from among the 248 producers making Petite Sirah in California. Most of the wines in our tasting are from producers located in Napa Valley and Sonoma; however, the wines were also sourced from wineries/vineyards in Mendocino, Santa Barbara, Clarksburg, and the Central Coast. A wide variety of producers with small and medium-sized vineyards (e.g. Hayne, Frediani, Bacigualupi) were also included.

According to IWR practice, the bottlings were selected from within three price ranges: Entry Level $15 and below, Medium-Priced $15-$40, and High-End $40 and above. The IWR would like to thank the many wineries, distributors, and retailers, for contributing samples and making this tasting possible. In particular, special thanks go out to Jo Diaz, Executive Director, PS I Love You, The Country Vintner, Vinum Ventures, Inc., and the Vineyard, a retail store located in McLean, VA.

IWR tastings are conducted by an independent panel of tasters. The tasting panel is recruited by the publishers of IWR from among experienced sommeliers, wine writers, wine retailers, and other members of the trade. The panel for this tasting consisted of: Caterina Abbruzzetti, Wine Director, 2941 Restaurant, Falls Church, VA, Jim Arsenault, the Vineyard in McLean, Ed Fabian, Total Wines and More, Michael Potashnik, Publisher, International Wine Review and Virginia Wine Guide, and Jay Youmans, MW and Publisher, International Wine Review.

The tasting was held at the elegant 2941 Restaurant in Falls Church, Virginia. Logistical support for the tasting was provided by Mark and Jeanie Golub. The wines were opened two hours in advance of the tasting, placed in flights by price level and tasted blind. Each taster prepared tasting notes on the wines and rated them using the IWR's 100 point system. The ratings are as follows:

- ★★★ Highly Recommended  100-90 points
- ★★ Very Good  85-90 points
- ★ Good   80-85 points

The IWR's tasting notes and ratings appear in the final section of this report.

The Results

The main conclusions from our tasting are as follows:

First, the perception that Petite Sirah is a minor grape is unjustified. Petite Sirah should be taken more seriously by the trade and wine consumers. Hopefully this report will help contribute to a better appreciation of these wines. Education and promotion are essential to enhancing the marketability of this unique grape.

Second, there are a wide range of prevailing styles. Petite Sirah can be tannic, full bodied, tough and chewy, inky-black in color. These styles vary based on vine age, crop levels, vineyard composition, and site selection. Flavor descriptors range from blueberry to blackberry to intense black raspberry. Better examples exude spicy notes with cracked black pepper.
The spectrum can range from fruit forward and simple, to dense, complex and exotic. Petite Sirah often has a longer finish than most California Syrah, more fruit than Cabernet Sauvignon, and more complexity and balance than Zinfandel. Our tasting showed that many of these Petite Sirahs possess more “Australia Shiraz” characteristics than do most California Syrah/Shiraz. We, therefore, consider Petite Sirah to be the equal of these other grapes in terms of the quality of wine its produces.

Third, stylistic differences are difficult to attribute to individual California AVA, American Viticultural Area. Despite the often heard assertion that the Petite Sirahs from the Calistoga area are distinct and identifiable, our tasting was unable to confirm this assertion. While the wines in the Calistoga area are, indeed, producing very fine Petite Sirah, there were no discernable differences between the taste profiles of these wines and the other wines in the tasting. Winemaking, wine age, and vineyard composition, rather than terroir or site, appear to be the dominant factor defining the stylistic differences among these wines.

Fourth, many California producers are making outstanding wine from Petite Sirah. These wines offer excellent quality and immense pleasure for the money. There appears to be a close correlation between quality and price. In summary:

- The larger producers of Petite Sirah provide ripe, fresh blueberry and blackberry fruit-packed wines that are ready to drink. The wines are generally fruit forward and delicious. Many of the wines possess a luscious texture with well rounded, ripe tannins. Priced at under $15, these wines are a bargain. Affordable for daily consumption and generally yielding better value than many commercially made Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or Syrah.

- As you would expect, the Petite Sirahs available at the mid-price range are generally more complex than those at the entry level. While they offer scents of blackberries and blueberries, they also reveal black pepper and nuances of earth, leather, chocolate and toast, along with solid tannins for aging. Our panel was very impressed with the high quality of these wines. Priced generally at between $15 and $40, they represent outstanding value for the discerning wine enthusiast.

- At the higher price level, the wines are usually vineyard designated. Although they were distinctive wines, it was difficult to identify a commonality among the wines of the same AVA, except perhaps the wines from the Rockpile AVA. The dominant influences appear to be winemaking, wine age, clones, and vineyard composition (field blends), rather than a particular AVA. Sophisticated and elegant, these wines are produced in small quantities, and sold directly to buyers, on mailing lists, willing pay $75 a bottle.

Lastly, the IWR wholeheartedly recommends that members of the wine trade and discerning consumers take a closer look at and learn more about Petite Sirah. Given the high quality of the wines tasted in this report, and their excellent price-quality ratios, there should be many new converts to these wines, if promoted actively by distributors and retailers.

The rest of this report provides useful background information about Petite Sirah and a set of tasting notes to orient your future tastings. Further information about Petite Sirah can also be obtained on the web from the PS I Love You website http://www.psiloveyou.org or from the individual wineries.

Background on the Grape

Until recently, much like that of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah had a mysterious past and unknown ancestry. This, however, was finally solved in 2003. In the 1870’s a French nurseryman, Dr. François Durif crossed Syrah and Peloursin, developing a new grape variety called Durif. Dr. Durif knew that a new vine had been created in his nursery as the result of the crossing of two varietals, but he didn’t know the pollen source at the time. A grape cross occurs when the flower of the “mother” vine comes in contact with pollen from the “father” vine. Today, we now know that the pollen source was indeed Syrah.

Dr. Durif was attempting to develop a grape variety that was resistant to powdery mildew, a common problem in southern France. But the grape’s compact clusters made this variety susceptible to a different problem: bunch rot. This problem offset the value of its mildew-free attributes. As a result, Durif was never able to produce consistent, high quality wines in the growing conditions of southern France.

In 1884, however, Durif was introduced into California where it thrived. The warmer, drier growing conditions offset the problems posed by its tight clusters. Plantings of Durif spread quickly. Later it would become known as Petite Sirah. The ATTF now recognizes both names for Federal label approval. By the turn of the century, Petite Sirah rivaled the two most popular wine grapes of the time, Zinfandel and Mourvedre (or Mataro), in terms of acreage. Petite Sirah became commonly used in “Burgundy” blends, prior to the advent of varietally labeled wine. In the 1930’s there were nearly 7,500 acres of Petite Sirah in California, and by 1976, total acreage had peaked at around 14,000 acres. Petite Sirah was booming.
Then, Petite Sirah became one of the first victims of the onslaught of international grape varieties. Fashion in wine began to change. Varietally labeled wine began to wax, and generic blends began to wane. Grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon began to displace Petite Sirah in the counties of Sonoma, Napa, and Monterey. By 1990, California Petite Sirah plantings had dwindled to a mere 1400 acres.

Only recently, through DNA fingerprinting, was Dr. Carole Meredith, formerly of UC Davis, able to confirm that 90% of the Petite Sirah planted in California today is in fact Durif. Much of the other 10% is largely Peloursin, which is nearly identical to Durif. Many older Petite Sirah vineyards commonly consist of field blends containing Alicante Bouchet, Carignane, Mourvedre (Mataro), Grenache, Zinfandel, and even Mondeuse.

Petite Sirah in the Vineyard

As one enthusiastic winemaker has said, “The beautiful thing about Petite Sirah is that it takes advantage of California’s attributes: sunshine and dry summers. It is the most delicious grape in the vineyard.”

Petite Sirah routinely yields between four to seven tons per acre, with older plantings producing between 1-2 ½ tons per acre. It is a mid-season ripener, performing best on deeper soils with gravelly-loam bench land sites employing cordon training. Head pruned vines, found mainly on “old vines” can achieve great results on shallow soils.

Because of the tight clusters, Petite Sirah is subject to bunch rot when damp conditions or rain occurs. This, however, does not usually present a problem in California. Petite Sirah is also susceptible to leaf roll and corky bark viruses. Petite Sirah vines are smaller than that of Syrah for example, and far less vigorous. The berries produced are smaller, and rounder and extremely high in polyphenolics, color and tannin. Petite Sirah is somewhat prone to sunburn.

DNA profiles have shown that much of California’s old-vine Petite Sirah vineyards contain various clones of Durif, and Peloursin. Much of the newly planted Petite Sirah in Napa appears to be Clone #3 which is available from UC Davis.

Winemaking Challenges and Styles

In the winery, the challenge in making high quality Petite Sirah is controlling the tannins. The key is to start with phenolically ripe fruit, where the stems, seeds, and pips are brown, rather than green. Use of multiple rackings, aerative pump-overs, and shorter macerations help control tannin.

Petite Sirah is often matured in American oak, while some winemakers feel that it benefits from a combination of French and American oak. The general feeling among winemakers is that Petite Sirah soaks up oak and can easily handle the more overt flavor often characteristic of American oak. Petite Sirah is prized as a blending grape for its deep color, and tannic structure. Petite Sirah is often chosen to blend into Zinfandel to add complexity, color, and body.

Serving and Pairing with Food

The key to serving Petite Sirah is to decant the wine, regardless of bottle age, prior to serving. Allow young wines to breath for two hours or more and older wines at least one hour.

Petite Sirah is enjoyable by itself, but is an ideal accompaniment to a variety of dishes. Not surprisingly, it pairs well with grilled or roast beef, pork, lamb or game, and their rich sauces. It also pairs well with rich flavorful stews and fatty meat dishes such as Osso Bocco.

Tasting Notes

Entry Level $15 and below

Highly Recommended

★★★ Concannon 2003 Petite Sirah Central Coast ($15.00)
Concannon has been producing high quality Petite Sirah for many years and this wine is no exception. The 2003 Petite Sirah is a blockbuster wine with a saturated purple color and brooding aromas of black currant fruit and savory spice. On the palate, this full-bodied offering reveals rather soft round blue and blackberry fruit, good acidity and length with some moderate aging potential. A dark beauty.

★★★ Pedroncelli 2001 Family Vineyards, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma County ($14.50)
This outstanding offering from Pedroncelli reveals enticing dense black currant fruit and spice aromas on the nose and saturated black fruit flavors and wood spice on the palate. It is a medium bodied complex wine with exemplary fruit and oak integration, big rounded firm tannins, and a lovely long finish with grip. A remarkably complex wine with great aging potential.