

Send a valentine from the vine

Uncork these love potions

Heartening news for you unquenchable romantics who intend to use wine as a seduction vehicle on Valentine's Day: This year's options might be more wickedly efficient than usual.

For those who are normally tongue-tied by love, consider watching the Oscar-contending flick *Sideways* by yourself this weekend and then composing your own version of that soulful soliloquy Virginia Madsen delivers about "... the life of a wine, how it's a living thing ... how every time I open a bottle it's going to taste different than if I had opened it any other day." If purring those words over a bottle of pinot noir doesn't do the trick, it may be time to re-think your relationship.

Another offbeat strategy is to sample something that is both trendy and harks back to ancient aphrodisiacs. Pomegranates have re-emerged as a sensual element in contemporary cuisine, and now Proshyan Wine Factory of Armenia is making a wine from them and exporting it to major markets in America. Their non-vintage version is semisweet, enticingly aromatic and costs about \$9 (armenian-wines.com).

If over-the-top luxury is more your style, then invest in one of the upper-tier rosé champagnes, which have come back into vogue. Among the best is the rich, decadent 1995 Dom Perignon Rosé, which sells for about \$325 a bottle — and could be worth every penny.

Finally, for those who tend to fall for underdogs and/or wine geeks, why not embrace an oddly named but potentially rewarding grape that has been working its way back into the hearts of California wine-makers recently? Petite sirah fits the Valentine's theme with its heart-throbbing muscularity, provocative spiciness and supple texture (when made carefully). Its under-the-radar coolness even comes with its own advocacy group of growers and producers known as P.S. I Love You (psiloveyou.org).

"It offers something to zinfandel lovers who are looking for a wine with a little more guts, and it usually has less alcohol," says spokeswoman Jo Diaz. The flavors, which can include blackberries, blueber-



By Katye Martens, USA TODAY

For wine lovers: Vina Robles 2001 Petite Sirah is a fine example of the underappreciated petite sirah grape.

ries, coffee, chocolate, tobacco and pepper, and the firm structure "offer an alternative to always having cabernet sauvignon with beef."

The grape has been grown in California since the 1880s and has been used mainly to add color and heft to blended wines. But petite sirah has always suffered from an identity crisis. Historically, several grapes have carried the name, and their botanical relationship to the better-known syrah grape and several obscure French grapes are tangled. However, a handful of faithful vintners always have believed that petite sirah can stand on its own as a varietal wine, and that has enabled the grape not only to survive but also to thrive. P.S. I Love You counted 65 petite sirah producers in 2001; today there are more than 190.

"It has withstood the test of time, and people who like it are very passionate about it," Diaz says.

True Valentine's virtues, in other words.

To get a sense of the wine's potential, check out some of these versions that stood out in a recent tasting of 24 bottles. Available vintages will vary from market to market; in this case older is usually better, because this high-tannin wine benefits from a few years' aging.

Expect to pay \$10 to \$18 for entry-level versions and \$25-\$40 for reserve wines.

- ▶ 2002 Bogle, Calif., \$10.
- ▶ 2003 Concannon "Selected Vineyard," Central Coast, \$12.
- ▶ 2002 Pedroncelli, Dry Creek Valley, \$14.
- ▶ 2002 Foppiano "Estate Bottled," Russian River Valley, \$18.
- ▶ 2000 Guenoc, North Coast, \$18.
- ▶ 2001 Vina Robles, Jardine Vineyard, Paso Robles, \$26.
- ▶ 2001 Stags' Leap Winery, Napa Valley, \$27.
- ▶ 2002 Trentadue, Alexander Valley, \$28.
- ▶ 2002 Miro, Coyote Ridge Vineyard, Dry Creek Valley, \$30.
- ▶ 2001 Silkwood Wines "Silkwood," Stanislaus County, \$35.
- ▶ 2001 EOS "Cupa Grandis," Paso Robles, \$40.

NATION'S NEWSPAPER

USA TODAY

NO. 1 IN THE USA