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Wine Notes: Word spreading of petite sirah

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Modesto's John Monnich is the new president of a group called "P.S. I Love You."

Monnich is not enamored with the name, but admits it is a cute marketing tool. P.S. stands for petite sirah, a grape and wine that Monnich and a growing number of vintners are producing.

The list includes more than 190 wineries, including Monnich's Silkwood Wines, which has won some impressive hardware in recent competitions with its petite sirah.

What is petite sirah, exactly? Well, as a wine, it's not really petite at all, and while it is related, it's not syrah, either.

The petite in the name refers to the small leaf on the vine, and not the muscularity of the wine, Monnich said. He describes the wine as "Gutsy, big, bold and black."

The name's similarity with syrah can be a point of confusion for consumers, and the syrah grape is indeed a parent of petite sirah, Monnich said. In France, the petite sirah grape is known as durif.

The petite sirah grape was plentiful in California during prohibition, when it was a popular home wine ingredient, shipped by growers here to the East Coast, according to Monnich.

It has been widely used since then as a blending grape, because its thick skin gives a deep color and body to wines. Rumor has it that petite sirah was a key ingredient of E.&J. Gallo's Hearty Burgundy, and a cause of that wine's popularity.

California vineyard plantings of petite sirah peaked in 1976 at 14,000 acres, but the grape fell on hard times, and acreage fell to just 1,700 by 1990.

Since then, it's grown in popularity as a stand-alone varietal wine, and there are now 5,200 acres planted.

Advances in viticulture and winemaking are largely responsible for the resurgence, Monnich said. In the old days, petite sirah wine was "a brute," he said.

"It was rough on taste, rough on the throat, rough in the mouth," he said. "It gave petite sirah a bad name."

With techniques like aging on wood and hand-harvesting, however, the wine becomes very smooth, with less tannins and better mouth feel and balance, Monnich said.

"It's just outstanding. A wonderful, noble wine," he said.

P.S. I Love You is dedicated to spreading the word about petite sirah, at first to what the wine industry refers to as "gatekeepers" — distributors, restaurant and wine shop buyers, and owners.

The group is scheduling its second "Blue Tooth Tour," a train ride around the country by winemakers to spread the word. Blue Tooth refers to that dark color, and what a glass of petite sirah does to the dental work.

Receptions will be held at various stops along the way, Monnich said.

The tour is sponsored by Concannon, the Livermore winery owned by The Wine Group.

So if you are bored with the cabernetmerlot-syrah thing and aren't afraid of a set of blue incisors, you can get a list of the wineries that produce petite sirah at www.psiloveyou.org.

Petite sirah can be found in local wine shops and grocery stores, if you search a bit. Prices can range from $12 to $30 or $40, for the fancy stuff.

If you are partial to local products, you could pick up a bottle of Silkwood. They are the bottles with the fuzzy labels.

Monnich said he is experimenting with a blend of petite sirah and syrah.

He's calling it "Que Syrah Sirah."

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