



## PETITE SIRAH

BY BOB ECKER

*Nothing Petite About This Wine*

**P**etite Sirah, a big, macho, red grape is truly an up-and-coming varietal on American wine lists, but it has been around for some time. Known by many in the wine industry as the only “All American Grape,” Petite Sirah began its life in the late 1870’s when an amateur French botanist, Dr. Francois Durif, first brought his creation to California. Unlike many wine grapes, this one produces very small berries—hence the name Petite. The grape is a direct cross between the **Peloursin** (mother) and **Syrah** (father) grape varieties. At some point in the late 1880’s, California growers changed the name to Petite Sirah, perhaps for the berries’ diminutiveness. “I believe that it’s California’s true heritage wine,” said Louis Foppiano, an early proponent, and steady producer of delicious Petite Sirahs. Curiously, the French, to this day, refuse to officially “recognize” Petite Sirah as a true wine grape. Happily, we have no such barriers. For years, Petite Sirah grapes were widely planted in hot areas throughout California, mostly used as a blending grape, providing intense dark color and strong tannins. In some spots it was the number one planted red varietal.

Granted, Petite Sirahs aren’t for everyone. Inky is the first descriptor that comes to mind, for its purple-almost-blue color. (In fact, a Petite Sirah trade group called *PS I Love You*, truly a champion of the varietal, used to give out toothbrushes at samplings!) Strong is another descriptor, as is powerful. These wines often (though not always) tend to be bold, spicy, intense and alcoholic. Today, things are changing as Petite Sirahs have come into their own and winemakers have learned how to tame and refine Petite Sirahs; to bring out the grapes’ complex, wonderful flavors and soften rough edges. As an added bonus, most Petite Sirahs are not usually expensive.

**Concannon Vineyard**, back in 1964 was the first winery to label Petite Sirah a varietal, and along with a few others, helped put this zesty grape back on the map. In fact, Concannon (which has been around since 1884) makes an entire series of intriguing Petites, including their smoky, yet delicate, **Heritage Petite Sirah**. This wine is one of the best around and truly expresses the positive qualities of the varietal. Yum.

**Stag’s Leap Winery** has also long been a fan of this grape and has made beautiful wines out of these “bastard” grapes. **Robert Biale** is another marvelous Petite producer out of **Napa**, as is **Quixote**, a boutique **Stag’s Leap Winery** with two flagship Petite Sirahs. **Bogle Vineyards**, from the

“**Silkwood** from the Central Valley is another serious Petite Sirah grower/winery making stellar wines”

Curious that the French to this day, refuse to officially “recognize” Petite Sirah as a true wine grape. Happily, we have no such barriers.

Clarksburg area, makes a tasty Reserve Petite Sirah with a big berry nose and a luscious finish. EOS out of Paso Robles creates

stunning Petite Sirahs including *Cupa Grande*, and viscous, yet oh-so-smooth *EOS Reserve*. **Parducci** out of Mendocino County and other notable Petite Sirahs include: **Pedroncelli** and **Mounts Family Winery** from Sonoma’s warm Dry Creek Valley, who both produce “Pets” of excellent quality. You can feel the sweet, chocolatey, tobacco notes sliding down your throat. **Silkwood** from the Central Valley is another serious Petite Sirah grower/winery making stellar wines. **Lake County** (CA) is represented by a few standouts such as *39 Degrees*. (39 degrees refers to the latitude line that crosses through many prime grape growing regions). In fact, the cherry/berry *39 Degrees* would be perfect with some rib-smacking barbecue. Petite Sirahs, in general, stand up to strong meats, barbecue, game meats and powerful sauces. One producer even recommends their “Pet” with Peking duck. One suggestion in the hot weather is to chill the wines just a tad—so they can be enjoyed outdoors.

Big, bold Petite Sirahs are getting more attention than ever before in the press, in stores, and by the public. “Petite Sirah has always been my favorite grape and was the first red grape we ever planted,” said Bogle’s owner, Patty Bogle.

Still under-the-radar, Petite Sirah is on the upswing, as more and more growers, winemakers, retailers, and consumers, recognize the value and beauty of this varietal. Ask your local sommelier or wine merchant, who will probably give you a knowing smile, recognizing a fellow Petite lover, and will happily pick out one of their favorites. I’ve been a fan of the varietal for years and suggest you give these wines a try. Remember, there is nothing small about Petite Sirah, and don’t forget your toothbrush! **SLV**

Illustration by Richard Ruby—Ruby Illustration