



SILKWOOD
WINES

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Petite sirah is a bold player

By TOM BENDER

If you know petite sirah, you know it is not petite at all.

This dark, inky, chewy red is gaining in popularity. It's probably not a common selection at your favorite restaurant, and is not built for warm weather and outdoor dining, but it does match well with some of our most popular grilling meats.

Petite sirah has been treated as a blending wine over the years. It was thought to be the most heavily planted grape in Napa in the 1960s, accounting for nearly 60 percent of the vineyards until cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay took lead roles.

Its origin goes back to the late 1800s when Francois Durif, nurseryman, crossed syrah with an obscure old grape called peloursin, and named the dark thick-skinned grape durif, after himself.

The grape made its way to California in the 1880s, becoming so popular that upwards of 7,000 acres were planted in the 1930s. It was shipped across country for home winemaking, which was legal during Prohibition. It peaked at about 14,000 acres in the mid-1970s and fell to about 2,400 acres in the mid-1990s; it is now at 4,000-plus acres.

Concannon Vineyards in Livermore grew it more than 100 years ago and started marketing it under its current varietal grape name, petite sirah, almost 50 years ago. There are a number of wineries producing petite sirah today, but 80 percent of them make fewer than 400 cases annually.

While it has not enjoyed the recent surge in popularity that zinfandel has, petite sirah now boasts of an organization totally devoted to this black grape. It's called "PS ... I Love You" and numbers more than 80 winery members with the majority being in California.

A popular blending grape, its dark berry color and aggressive structure make it a nice addition to zinfandel, and a number of reds or house blends. Ridge Vineyards, a leading zin producer, blends upwards of 10 percent petite in most of its wines.

More of a wintertime red because of its heartiness and bold spice flavors, petite sirah matches well with comfort foods and hearty flavors. A classic old-fashioned meatloaf baked with a spicy tomato sauce topping works well with most petites. More recipes and food matches can be found at the PS ... I Love You Web site, www.psiloveyou.org.

This full-flavored red shows regional differences just like zinfandel. There are a number of ripe and jammy examples from Lodi, not to mention several of our **local producers...Silkwood, who have had great success with it.**

www.silkwoodwines.com