



SILKWOOD

WINES

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PETITE SIRAH'S POWERFUL TASTE GAINING STATURE

By Chis Sherman

SARASOTA — Little wines scored big at the 18th annual Florida Winefest & Auction, and none quite so big as petite sirah, a once forgotten French hybrid and California workhorse that's now in revival.

Modest revival perhaps, but there's no modesty among the winemakers and others who champion this tiny grape with the rich black juice.

"It's the biggest and baddest red wine out there," Jo Diaz of P.S. I Love You said shamelessly at a packed seminar last month. The California trade group supports the wine and its makers.

Louis Foppiano, whose family has made petite or "pet" for 50 years at Foppiano Vineyards, threw down another gauntlet. "You see someone pour a glass of zinfandel and say, 'Look at how dark it is,' it's not all zin but the petite they put in it."

In fact, petite sirah and zinfandel are both now considered California heritage grapes, varieties of less than noble ancestry. Both became American signatures but also have the hot peppery influences of the Rhone, Provence, southern Italy and Croatia.

Yet petite sirah is distinct, a cross of syrah and peloursin born in southern France 125 years ago. Yet it found its true home in California where it was first known as Durif, for its founder.

Sarasota saw more petites than ever, from \$10 to \$30. Concannon, another pioneer, was there, as were Trentadue, **Silkwood** and Michael-David's Earthquake, all **big**

friendly bruisers that can easily last decades.

Biggest of all and certainly the biggest smile came from Michael-David's Petite Petit, which blends petite sirah with petit verdot, one of the lesser varieties in Bordeaux but one that packs its own punch of high tannin and sugar.

Mixed 50-50, it's high-powered blackberry jam you could eat with a spoon, appropriately illustrated on the label by two cartoon elephants kicked back in easy chairs under the big top.

There were other minor varieties that got their day in Sarasota, including pinotage from South Africa, viognier and pinot gris from California and garnacha from Spain.

They signified the growing success of the ABC movement (Anything But Chardonnay/Cabernet) among consumers exploring other tastes.

Consumer willingness to experiment doesn't cause this diversity, but it allows farmers and winemakers of a still young industry to find the right grapes for their site.

Indeed, the petite sirah growers all came from less fabled California appellations from Lodi to Livermore, different terroirs, but all had the one thing that petite wants: dry summers. Rain swells the berries so they are watered down and hardly petite

But the grape is no longer starved for respect. In 1990 there were only 1,700 acres; in 2007, 50 wineries from Bogle to Ridge and David Bruce made petite sirah from 6,500 acres.