

Petite Sirah

Written by Terry Connor
Monday, 17 June 2013 15:15

Dorothy Gaiter and John Brecher wrote wine articles for the Wall Street Journal up until just a few years ago. They no longer write about wine and I miss them. John and Dorothy knew how to take the "work" out of their jobs and replace it with fun. Where ever they landed I sincerely hope that all is well.

John and Dorothy introduced me to Petite Sirah back in the early 90's (Do not confuse it with Syrah or Shiraz; also notice the spelling of Sirah.) They introduced me to a wine that was an entirely new wine drinking experience. I discovered that Petite Sirah is produced from a grape called DURIF. Durif is a grape that originated in France, but it is also grown in Australia, the United States, and Israel. Somewhere along the way the name Petite Sirah evolved. For the sake of accuracy, I referred to Karen MacNeil's Wine Bible. She describes the evolution of the term Petite Sirah as probably originating in France; that the wine is Durif, a cross of Peloursin and Syrah grapes, created in France in the 1880s by a nurseryman named Dr. Durif. None of this information appears on the labels of wines called Petite Sirah, however this small bit of information just adds to the wine's mystique and cult-like status. In the United States we will probably never see a label with the word Durif. You may see it used on a label from Australia. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives recognizes "Durif" and "Petite Sirah" as interchangeable synonyms. (By the way, the "Petite" in the name of the wine refers to the size of the grape.)

There are many well recognized names producing Petite Sirah in California. Among them are Concannon, Geyser Peak, Foppiano, and Hidden Cellars. Concannon was first, when in 1961 Jim Concannon chose to bottle the first varietal labeled Petite Sirah. His nickname for the grape was "the little grape that could." Mr. Concannon had confidence in the potential of his product, and 50 some years later it is still going strong.

If I am looking for a full bodied wine I usually reach for a Cabernet Sauvignon that probably costs too much. I forget that a reasonably priced Petite Sirah is also a full bodied and robust wine and that I am guilty of the "coulda had a V-8 scenario." A much more sophisticated presentation is given to us by the San Francisco Chronicle staff wine writer. His name is Gerald D. Boyd. (He also is the Chief Judge for the Pacific Rim International Wine Competition – an enormous task.) Mr. Boyd concludes that Petite Sirah is a "Rhone Style" wine and not an oddball variety. Support for his conclusion is seconded by Ehren Jordan, a highly respected winemaker from Turley Wine Cellars. Support also comes from many more winemakers. The

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important point to remember is that, although each winemaker puts his personal twist on the Petite Sirah product, their common ground is a grape that is grown in tight clusters, is subject to "bunch rot," and will probably be available for harvest at mid-season.

I chose Bogle Wines for tasting notes because of the close connection that Bogle has with our own Hilton Head Food and Wine Festival. Tasting Petite Sirah will reveal ripe black cherry, honeysuckle, prune and traces of butter, vanilla, and cedar. The wine carries a good mouth feel and a long and pleasant finish. The wine is reasonably priced at \$9-12. Petite Sirah is available in the Lowcountry. You will find that the best food pairing is with roasted heavy red meats. A favorite is Steak au Poive.

WINESPEAK

Our number four child is a daughter who lives in France. She is married to a gentleman born and bred in Paris. They both enjoy wine very much. I consider Patricia, by parental prejudice, to be a 99% class act. The other 1% is trying to stump her old man, in a teasing fashion, on the subject of wine. Well, the other day she won. She had just returned from a trip to the Pyrenees Mountains and Basque Country. She asked me what is IROULEGUY. She could not see the total blank on my face. I admitted that I did not have a clue. I looked up Irouleguy and found that wines produced in this mountainous village are 70% red, 20% blanc, and 10% rose. The primary winery is Herri Mina. This was a real find for me as it was revealed that the winemaker is none other than Jean-Claude Berrouet. For many years Jean-Claude was the winemaker at Chateau Petrus. Patricia did stump her dad, but I learned some wine history.

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