

PETITE SIRAH / PETITE SYRAH

by Dennis Fife

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What really is Petite Sirah? How did so successful a grape come to America? And how can the Rhône varietal movement in America benefit from this unique variety which we now know is (in most cases) a synonym for Durif, a cross of Syrah and Peloursin?

The story of Petite Sirah (also spelled Petite Syrah both in France and in California) in America is only now finally being cleared up with the work of such scholars as Dr. Carole Meredith of UC Davis, Dr. Harold Olmo of UC Davis, several renowned ampelographers, and historian Charles Sullivan. This paper will summarize discussions and summaries of their writings as well as other sources in an attempt to reveal where Petite Sirah came from, its changes over time, and finally what it is today. To date there have been many incomplete stories and half truths about Petite Sirah throughout the general wine literature. Now, for the first time, we understand the facts well enough to set the story straight.

A note on my background: I have been involved with growing, producing, and marketing Petite Sirah since 1972. First with Cresta Blanca, then Inglenook Napa Valley, and Stags' Leap Winery, and now with Fife Vineyards. I have worked with over 20 different vineyards planted with this variety in Napa and Mendocino Counties. I have followed the research on Petite Sirah, and Fife Vineyards participated in the most recent DNA study by Dr. Meredith. To me there is no question that Petite Sirah is a noble variety. As a winegrower, I see many similarities to Syrah in flavor and texture and also in how Petite Sirah responds in growing and winemaking. I believe Petite Sirah -- as rare as it is -- has produced several of California's most successful wines over the past thirty years. Petite Sirah has numerous fans who are very passionate about it, as they are about Syrah and Rhône blends.

1. What we know about the identity of Petite Sirah today._

Not much attention was paid to the true identity of Petite Sirah until the 1960s and 1970s with the rapid growth of the first varietally labeled wines. This period was immediately followed by the new focus on Rhône varieties in California -- particularly Syrah. So new interest developed as to just what Petite Sirah was and how it related to Syrah. In the 1970s, Paul Truel, a distinguished French ampelographer, examined some vines labeled Petite Sirah in the UC Davis variety collection and identified them as the French variety Durif. Although there was no immediate follow-up study to this single data point, it nonetheless became widely accepted that Petite Sirah in California was the French variety Durif, and this was reported in several wine publications. But some experts, including Dr. Harold Olmo of UC Davis, continued to believe that Petite Sirah was no fewer than three distinct varieties, one of which was Syrah. Dr. Olmo's grape breeding research took him all over the state and Petite Sirah was one of the varieties that he was interested in.

Of course, this new information begged the question: What is Durif? In the 1970s Durif was not a major variety and the information about it in the literature of the time was incomplete and often misleading. At the time one often heard, particularly from French vintners, that Durif was not related to Syrah, but was instead a “selection” of Peloursin, a French grape variety with limited value in the Rhône and considered to make “ordinary” wine. This half truth was later proven to be incorrect, but until recently most wine publications quoted this opinion. With the rise of Syrah in America, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several important previously named Petite Sirah vineyards in California were renamed as Syrah. Thus, while Olmo was correct when he stated that some Petite Sirah was Syrah, this generally ceased to be true. Many other vineyards were found to have many varieties (sometimes numbering in the teens) including Syrah and Durif. A few of these mixed vineyards are being carefully preserved, but unfortunately, most of these “mixed” old blocks were replanted and also lost to the Petite Sirah world. As we will see, this renaming or replanting of vineyards over a period of the last twenty years or so has resulted in the fact that Petite Sirah is now predominately Durif.

In the early 1990s Dr. Carole Meredith at UC Davis began to have extraordinary success with a new DNA technique which identified grape varieties with a high degree of accuracy. By 1996 she had identified four of the seven Petite Sirahs in the UC Davis collection as Durif, one as “true” Syrah, one as Peloursin, and one as Pinot Noir. In her more recent study, she determined that Petite Sirah in the North Coast today is predominately Durif and most of the rest is mixed old blocks -- often with Durif. (Only one vineyard was found to be predominantly Peloursin). **But, importantly, Dr. Meredith also confirmed that DNA identified Syrah as one of the parents of Petite Sirah. Durif is Peloursin fertilized by Syrah and thus shares the characteristics of both varieties.**

Upon further examination aided by her colleagues in France, Dr. Meredith found that Durif was a cross that was selected for planting by a grape breeder named Durif, at the University of Montpellier in the 1880s. (We now know that many noble varieties such as Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Chardonnay are all crosses. Note that a cross should be distinguished from a hybrid, the result of fertilization between two different species of grapes). Durif was found to produce small berries with saturated color, dense fruit, and with many of the characteristics of Syrah. Although it was never a leading variety in the Rhône, Durif was encouraged by the University at Montpellier due to its relative freedom from powdery mildew -- one of Syrah’s problems. Today Durif is a minor variety in France and approved for A.O.C. only in Palette, a small appellation in Provence. **But the loss of interest in Durif in the Rhône Valley stemmed entirely from its tendency to develop grey rot in their typical growing season which often experiences high humidity.**

So we now know that Petite Sirah in America began as merely another name for Syrah. Later it became merely another name for Durif. But, for most of its history it was used interchangeably for Syrah, Durif, or mixed blocks of dark red varieties primarily used in premium red blends. Finally, we know that today Petite Sirah has been shown to be primarily Durif a cross of Syrah and Peloursin – both of which are from the Rhône and Provence. (Ironically, the BATF does not accept Petite Sirah as a synonym for Durif, but this may well change based on the current research results. Or perhaps in America we should just continue the 100 year history of defining Petite Sirah by the category of wines it makes.)

2. The history of Petite Sirah in America._

The story Petite Sirah in America starts in the Rhône Valley with Syrah. Galet in his well known book, *A Practical Ampelography*, states that historically in France the grape now often referred to as “true Syrah” was referred to as Syrah, Schiras, Sirac, Syrac, Sirah, Petite Sirah, Petite Syrah, Hignin Noir, Entournerien, Serine, and Serenne._ With this many synonyms, it is not surprising that there has been much confusion about the history of Syrah and Petite Sirah in France and that this confusion carried over to America. Another established scientist, Valet, wrote that in the late nineteenth century, winegrowers were convinced that there was a ‘petite’ Syrah [today we would call this a clone] prevalent around Hermitage and Cote Rôtie and that this grape was better than the ‘grosse’ Syrah [clone] elsewhere. Thus vintners began to search for the nobler ‘petite’ Syrah when replanting. At this same time in other parts of the Rhône Valley, the name Petite Syrah (or Petite Sirah) began being used as a synonym for the new plantings of Durif. That this caused confusion is not surprising. Since this was exactly the time that Syrah was first brought to California from the Rhône, clearly vintners looking for the superior “petite” Syrah ended up with Petite Syrah.

In his recent book, Charles Sullivan states that the first “true Syrah” came to California in the Napa Valley in 1878. He explains that it was called *petite* Syrah for the small berries and very low yields. According to Sullivan, in these early days several Napa Valley vintners made good wines from “true” Syrah . . . but it was never popular.

Sullivan states that the first evidence of a name confusion in California started a few years later when one of the first California Syrah growers, McIver, also imported Durif in 1884. “He soon was calling the wine Petite Sirah.” Thus, only a few years after the first Syrah was planted in California, it was joined by Petite Sirah in one of the same vineyards. According to Sullivan, “Crabb [another Syrah grower at the time], visited McIver and then commented in the industry press on the confusion. He did like the Durif for its color and vinosity, but didn’t see why it should be called Sirah”.

Sullivan goes on to state that: “in the 1890s virtually all the true Syrah in California was destroyed by phylloxera. But after 1897, when good times brought vast planting and replanting all over the state, something called Petite Sirah became a popular variety. It was not Syrah and was probably Durif.” (Based on everything we now know -- particularly from the research of Dr. Olmo and Dr. Meredith -- it is highly likely that the term Petite Sirah at this time referred to several dark skinned varieties including Syrah and Durif.) Sullivan states that this new Petite Sirah was touted for its color, fragrance, and good yields and became a mainstay of the red burgundy blends made by many top wine houses. This trend continued and Petite Sirah became a key blend component in many of the finest red wines produced in California (Both varietal wines and blends) right up through most of the 1970s (just as northern Rhône wines were blended into many important Bordeaux and Burgundy wines in the 19th century).

Sullivan tells us that during Prohibition, Petite Sirah in the North Coast was one of the most important varieties shipped east in boxcars for home winemakers. This probably preserved many

of these old vineyards yet at the same time led to more confusion as growers probably paid even less attention to keeping varieties straight since they were not making wine. At some point in history this trend led to a period where several grape nurseries sold a “Petite Sirah” that was a blend of the budwood of several dark red varieties that would vary depending upon what might be available. Typical varieties in such a blend we now know might be Durif, Zinfandel, “true” Syrah, Alicante Bouschet, Valdeguie, Gamay, Mondeuse, and others. Writes Sullivan, “After Repeal there were about 7,500 acres of Petite Sirah in California, about half of them planted before 1920 . . . but acreage declined to about 4,500 acres in the 1960s.”

The first varietally labeled Petite Sirahs were in the 1960's (most used the Petite Sirah spelling but several have continued to use the Petite Syrah spelling). Among the first were Concannon in Livermore, Cresta Blanca in Mendocino, plus Stags' Leap Winery, Souverain (then under founder Lee Stewart), Inglenook Napa Valley, and Ridge's York Creek Petite Sirah all from the Napa Valley. All of these wines referenced a connection to the Rhône on their labels or in their marketing materials. And all of these producers produced several excellent wines in the 60s and 70s that aged well and today are collectors' items.

In summary, Petite Sirah in its over 100 years of note in America has made some wonderful varietal wines; added density, color and spice to red wine blends – including many of the finest Syrahs and Rhône blends of today; and its tough skin made it a good shipping grape during Prohibition -- which left us the heritage of many old vineyards today. During much of this long history, “true” Syrah almost died out in America, except where it was labeled as or interplanted with Petite Sirah. In many ways Petite Sirah was the seed for keeping Syrah and other Rhône varieties in many peoples' minds until the modern Rhône movement in America occurred.

3. For over 100 years, Petite Sirah has been regularly referred to by the industry and in the American press as a Rhône variety. There are numerous reasons to continue to do so.

Petite Sirah has helped raise the reputation and awareness of Syrah by adding the intrigue of its mysterious origins linked to the Rhône and Syrah. And Syrah has benefited from the zeal of Petite Sirah fanatics wanting to learn everything about Syrah. In fact, many of us find that the fans of our Petite Sirah are the same customers who avidly buy our Syrah. For example, when those of us who produce both, bring Petite Sirah and Syrah to a tasting, the press, trade, and consumers alike want to taste them side-by-side. They find this educational and fun. They love the idea that America has “its own Rhône variety”, and they want to see in what way the two varieties taste different. If one is a Petite Sirah fan, it is natural to want to try Syrah and vice versa. In this way, association with Petite Sirah has long attracted consumers to Syrah -- and other Rhône wines as well.

Syrah and Petite Syrah wines can be so close in flavor and texture that even experts have a difficult time telling them apart -- and the better the wine, the more this is true. At Fife Vineyards, we have a wonderful Napa Valley vineyard with alluvial soils with lots of rocks. In this vineyard we have young Syrah planted in 1990 next to Petite Sirah planted in the 1950s. Our most successful wine, Max Cuvée is made from a blend of these two blocks. We find that vintage to vintage we have wide swings in the blend depending upon the quality and character of

each block in a given year. From time to time, we also make a barrel or so of the Syrah and one of the Petite Syrah from this vineyard just to better understand the components of Max Cuvèe. When made identically and aged in top Burgundian barrels, the more elegant, longer finished wine more often than not is the Petite Sirah -- which DNA studies of our vines confirms is Durif. All three of these wines have been rated very highly in the wine press with the blend, Max Cuvèe, being most reviewers and consumers top choice.

We typically have blind tastings of California's top Syrahs and Petite Sirahs every few months. Our guests are all quite knowledgeable, all in the wine business, and about half are syrah winemakers. We have yet to have a tasting where it was possible to separate the Syrahs from Petite Sirahs with any confidence. And often no one identifies them all correctly. (Our experience is that low quality Syrah tends to be light, out of balance, and with little character and low quality Petite Sirah tends to be rough and tannic. Thus they are fairly easy to separate. But great wines of these two varieties are separated mostly by winemaking style and the terroir. Petite Sirah tends to be pretty dense, but so are many top Syrahs -- and so are many of our favorite wines from the Cote Rôtie).

When it comes to Rhône blends at Fife Vineyards, our preference is to include at least a little Petite Sirah in every blend. Petite Sirah tends to be tasted in the end palate so even in small amounts Petite Sirah can add length and density to the blend without becoming dominant. In fact, it blends so well with the other Rhône varieties that its parentage is obvious. We all know that grape varieties express themselves differently in different terroirs. If we as winegrowers in California are striving to produce the character, flavor, and texture of some of the finest wines in the Rhône today, particularly in the blended wines, Petite Sirah would appear to be a key ingredient to provide the density, fullness, and white pepper spices characteristic of many of the finest wines in the Rhône. As a reminder: Durif was not approved for A.O.C. status in the Rhône Valley because of the propensity of Durif to develop grey rot in a humid climate. (However, it was approved for A.O.C. status in the less humid climate of Palette in Provence). But, one only has to try Durif (Petite Sirah) in a few blends and it is obvious that Durif would have been approved for A.O.C. status in the Rhône if the Rhône had California's climate.

Currently, one third of the Petite Sirah in California is non-bearing and unlike Syrah, most of the grapes are in Coastal counties. (Of course, Syrah is growing faster, as it should.) On an industry-wide basis, Petite Sirah plantings will always grow at close to the same rate as the Rhône category in total, since it is one of the principal varieties in Rhône blends, and often blended into Syrah. Thus, there will probably always be new, updated vineyards from which it will be possible to make ever better Petite Sirah. Note that the price for Petite Sirah grapes is the same as Syrah currently, but it will soon be higher because it is shorter in supply. The bottle price for Petite Sirah is also very comparable to Syrah; therefore the market rates them similar in value.

I would also like to point out that Petite Sirah wines are improving rapidly at the present time thanks to the existence of more sophisticated winemaking equipment and a greater knowledge of how to handle the grapes in the winery for optimum results. We now have the means to significantly reduce harsh tannins and bitterness, and at the same time better bring out Petite

Sirah's great fruit. I expect a big step up in quality by the top producers of this variety over the next few years.

While Syrah is clearly the top Rhône grape for California in the future, it is still fun to compare the finest Syrahs with the rarer top Petite Sirahs. To date, the ratings, awards received and general recognition of the two varieties in America have been outstanding and pretty equal -- with Syrah on the rise. In our country, competition has always been a great generator of attention and improvement. Think of all the great press opportunities to follow the progress of Syrah vs Petite Sirah vs Rhône blends. While we all believe that Syrah has already become the "star" of the red Rhône varieties, having Petite Sirah in the "wings" can only help Syrah's elevation -- and competition only helps to motivate us all to do our best work.

Perhaps the strongest recommendation by the press for including Petite Sirah in our efforts to promote Rhône varieties is the attached statement by Remington Norman in his recent award-winning book Rhône Renaissance. He states: "Whatever the truth, and however vocal the dissenters, the variety (Petite Sirah) can make excellent wine which often is indistinguishable from true Syrah."

_ Paraphrased from conversations with and two articles by Dr. Carole Meredith of UC Davis, 1996 - 2000.

_ Paraphrased from A Companion to California Wine, by Charles L. Sullivan, 1998.

_ A Practical Ampelography, Pierre Galet, 1979.