

# Beverage®

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Petite Sirah  
Petite Syrah  
Syrah  
Shiraz  
Serine  
there's lots of  
confusion,  
and change,  
out there.

Syrah and Sirah have both become almost as common as Cabernet and Merlot. When I first started waiting tables in the late 1970s, however, it was Petite Sirah, not Syrah or Sirah, which first appeared on the restaurant's wine list. The restaurant, which had cuisine with a Provence-Nouvelle cuisine theme, did have Hermitage, Cote-Rotie, Crozes-Hermitage, etc. on the wine list. It was confusing to me. The French then were unwillingly to give any credit to the identity of the grape. Going back to that first Petite Sirah, it was from Concannon Vineyard. I didn't know why the Sirah sounded like Syrah and why it was so "petite" then. That's why I am writing this article.

Let's start this adventure by taking a step back to look at Syrah, the red grape that comes from the Rhone Valley. The famous ampelographer Galet in his book, "A Practical Ampelography", states that Syrah has many synonyms: Syrah, Schiras, Sirac, Sirah, Petite Sirah, Petite Syrah, Hignin Noir, Entourerien, Serine, and Serenne. Many producers in the Northern Rhone have made a distinction between a petit Syrah (small-berried Syrah) and gros Syrah (large-berried Syrah). Allan Bree, in an article on the website [www.gangofpour.com](http://www.gangofpour.com), interviewed Sean Thackrey, a California wine producer. Thackrey says that in the late 19th century, Californians brought back cuttings of the "Petite Syrah" known to be have been planted at the best sites on Hermitage hill in the Rhone Valley. This he says is the origin of the use of epithet "Petite" in California. He believes that Petite Syrah eventually became a category for less distinguished varieties. He also notes the existence of the mysterious Serine. "What was planted at Cote-Rotie certainly was never called "Syrah" - it was called "Serine", and Serine was a grape planted in California by the 1870s at the latest, since Hilgard called it by that name and used it in his experiments, which are published and well known." Andrew Jeffords, in his book "The New France", quotes winegrowers who claim Serine is a small-berried, autochthonous variety which gives Cote-Rotie its intense smokiness. Thackery believes that Serine, like Petite Syrah, was eventually absorbed into what was known as Petite Syrah. "So first we have 'Petite Syrah' as real Syrah from Hermitage, then we have 'Serine from Cote-Rotie, and we have both of them in California by the 1870s. Then we have the mess that 'Petite Sirah' has become, with Durif, Peloursin and whatever else thrown in."

The historian who has shed the most light on the Petite Sirah confusion is Charles L. Sullivan who touches on the topic in his two books, "Napa Wine" and "A Companion to California Wine". His playbook says that Syrah

came to California in 1878. It was called Petite Sirah because the clones that came over had small berries and low yields. In 1884, grower Charles McIver is believed to have planted a cross, called Durif. In the early 1880s, an amateur botanist in France, Dr. Francois Durif, had developed it. (Note that, if we are to be fair to the inventor of the grape, there should be one “f” in Durif, not two “f”s as is commonly spelled.) McIver referred to his Durif as Petite Sirah. Soon others were also calling it Petite Sirah. Sullivan contends that in the 1890s all the Sirah died due to phylloxera. When vineyards were replanted in 1897, what was then called Petite Sirah was probably widely planted instead. The low yields of Sirah had not made it popular among growers.

Sullivan mentions that, during Prohibition, Petite Sirah survived because its tough skin made it stand up to the abuse of shipping by boxcar. Petite Sirah was sent to home winemakers around the country. He reports that one bill of lading indicated that 358 boxcars were shipped out of Napa and Sonoma, more even than for Zinfandel. Nurseries increasingly used the name Petite Sirah to apply to a grab bag of varieties including Durif, Zinfandel, Sirah, Alicante Bouschet, Valdeguie, Gamay, Mondeuse and others. After Repeal 7500 acres of this so-called Petite Sirah existed in California - much of this was planted in Napa Valley. Concannon, in the Livermore Valley, became the first American vintner to varietally label the wine. The winery released its 1961 vintage in 1964. From Napa Valley came Ridge’s York Creek, Inglenook Napa, Stags’ Leap Winery, and Souverain. Cresta Blanca, a Mendocino winery, was also an early producer of Petite Sirah. A minority of these producers used the Petite Sirah spelling instead of Petite Sirah. During the 1970s, Petite Sirah was planted in the Central Valley. It was used as filler for “Burgundy” blends. By the 1980s, there were 4500 acres. During the ‘80s, an interest in Rhone wines set off a massive planting of Sirah grapes in California. Some of this enthusiasm spilled over onto Petite Sirah. In 1997, Carole Meredith, Professor Emerita of the Department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of California, used DNA fingerprinting to determine that the majority of the Petite Sirah vines grown at the UC Davis experiment station was identical to Durif. “They are simply two names for the same grape,” she asserted. She also discovered that Durif is cross of Peloursin, a Provence variety, and Sirah.

Dennis Fife of Fife Vineyards ([www.fivevineyards.com/fife/pdf/Fife\\_petitesirah.pdf](http://www.fivevineyards.com/fife/pdf/Fife_petitesirah.pdf)) reports that Petite Sirah plantings have grown slower than Sirah, but that the rate of Petite Sirah plantings has been consistent with the whole category of Rhone varieties. According to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, in 2002, California had 3260 bearing acres of Petite Sirah, and 1137 non-bearing acres, for a total of 4397 acres, up from 4127 acres in 2001. More recent California grape crush figures seem to indicate an up tick in Petite Sirah popularity. In the period from 2002 to 2003, Petite Sirah rose 22% in the volume of grapes crushed at harvest compared to a 9% rise in Sirah. Petite Sirah, however, still has a long way to go to catch up to Sirah. In 2003, there were 22,186 tons of Petite Sirah crushed compared to 110,388 tons of Sirah.

The First Annual Petite Sirah Symposium held at Foppiano Vineyards on August 6, 2002, gave Petite Sirah attention both from growers and the press. After the meeting, 65 producers created an organization to promote their beloved Petite. Journalist Dan Berger came up with a catchy name for the group - P.S. I Love You. Diaz Communications has energetically put Petite Sirah in the cross hairs of journalists. P.S. I Love You members have increased their numbers to 187 strong.

Richard Paul Hinkle, in an article entitled, “Where Petite Doesn’t Mean Small.”, reports that the growers at this first Symposium generally agreed that Petite Sirah performs best on benchland and hillsides. It gets too vigorous in wet soils. Humidity dramatically increases fungus attack, particularly in the grape bunches. The grapes have thin skins and the bunches are tight - both factors make the bunches extremely vulnerable to fungus. The rot problem is why the French have overlooked the grape. Most French wine regions are more humid than California ones. Today, Durif is a minor variety in southern France, approved for AOC production only in the tiny, little-known appellation of Palette. The growers at the symposium also noted that Petite Sirah berries are easily sunburned. In addition, it was mentioned that the variety needs a lot of potassium.

There remains a controversy over what the grape should be called. In 1996, The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms ruled that Petite Sirah and Durif were not synonymous. However, it left the door ajar. The BATF said that it would “continue to seek evidence regarding the true identity of the grape called Petite Sirah.” In 2002, the BATF announced that it was considering whether or not to allow Durif to be used as a synonym for Petite Sirah on wine labels. The agency’s successor, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, has yet to put forth a ruling on the issue. There is strong resistance in California to any regulation that would force producers to use Durif instead of Petite Sirah. Jo Diaz tells me that Australian producers call the variety Durif. They are eager for a pro-synonymous ruling in the US. Then they would then put pressure on their own government’s bureaucracy to accept use of Petite Sirah. Petite Sirah would be a much easier sell than Durif. Diaz also tells me that, in the California wine industry, “the Petite Sirah versus Petite Syrah controversy continues to simmer.” The ‘I’s clearly outnumber the ‘Y’s. David Bruce, a long time proponent of using “Petite Syrah” has recently moved to the ‘I’ side. The ‘Y’s may be in retreat. How the EU will react to all this will be yet another story.

Recently, at a lunch with Jim Concannon of Concannon Vineyard, I tasted a 2001 Syrah, Selected Vineyards, and a 2002 Petite Sirah, Selected Vineyards. The Syrah had lighter color, a classic Syrah burnt-rubber-and-asphalt-nuanced nose, and was quite tannic. The Petite Sirah had bluer coloration and had a raisiny, blackberry nose. In the mouth, it showed a soft spiciness. The tannins were less present than in the Syrah. I am not sure how much the different vintages may have played role, but to me the varietal profile of the Petite Sirah showed little resemblance to that of the Syrah. The Petite profile reminded me more of Zinfandel.

Three other wineries, Lolonis, Vina Robles and Marr Cellars gave me Petite Sirah samples to taste. A 2001 “Orpheus” from Lolonis Winery showed good purple-ruby coloration with an opulent nose loaded with cedar, prunes, raspberries, chocolate, and coconut and a round, alcoholic-hot, mouth with a bitter-chocolate tannic finish. It tasted like a super, juicy Zinfandel. A 2002 Vina Robles Petite Sirah identified by the vineyard name, Jardine, was lighter in color and a bit more garnet-pigmented than the Lolonis. Cooked-fruits, raspberry, chocolate, and vanilla filled out the nose. The mouth was soft, thick and alcoholic. The finish was low in tannin and somewhat short. A 2001 Vina Robles Jardine was better than its younger brother. It was slightly deeper in color, with a thicker, more blackberry-laden nose. It was also richer and thicker in the mouth than the 2002 with moderate astringency in the finish. Marr Cellars sent me a 2001 Cuvee Patrick and a 2002 Tehama Foothills. The Cuvee Patrick had a much lower suggested retail sticker price, \$13, compared to the \$27 of the Tehama Foothills. Qualitatively, the Tehama Foothills was more than twice the better wine. The Cuvee Patrick had moderate, garnet-tinted color... In the mouth there was moderate body . . . The Tehama Foothills had much deeper, purple-ruby color, a porty red-fruit and licorice nose with a substantial and well-balanced mouth. The finish showed pleasant astringent tannins. With its Tehama Foothills bottling, Marr Cellars has found a nice site for Petite Sirah and a starting point for a reputation for the variety.

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