



Emmett Reed, winemaker and vineyard manager at Gustafson Family Vineyard, displays Petite Sirah from the winery.

Turning Blue Over Petite Sirah

By Laura Ness

Long used as a backbone blender to add color and depth to nearly every blend made prior to and immediately following Prohibition, Petite Sirah has suffered the indignities of anonymity for far too long. Just ask any member of the P.S. I Love You organization that held its 7th annual Petite Sirah Noble Symposium at Concannon on Tuesday, August 4. The most geographically diverse gathering of Petite-ophiles to date for this particular forum, wineries came from as far away as Oregon and San Diego to share their enthusiasm for this massively dark and often misunderstood varietal. In between were wineries from Lake County, Mendocino, Napa, Dry Creek, Sonoma, Paso Robles, Lodi, and Santa Clara.

Organizer Jo Diaz announced that the petition to the TTB stating that Durif and Petite Sirah be recognized as one in the same, is on solid ground: the agency concurs there is enough evidence to substantiate this claim. Jim Concannon declared this “the single-most important thing that PS I Love You has done!” Hopefully, it puts an end to confusion over Durif vs Petite nursery stock, which up until now had to be labeled in accordance with the nursery nomenclature.

Symposium sponsor Jim Concannon addressed the gathering, recounting the conversation with a retailer in 1964 that begat the varietal trend. Up until then, they had blended Petite: going forward, Petite Sirah would become the winery’s clarion call. Today, Concannon is one of 30 Petite producers in Livermore: they farm 100



Photos - Doug Jorgensen

Jim Concannon read from a journal written by his great grandfather, Joe Concannon, about a wine tasting held in San Francisco. Joe Concannon mentions there were three Petite Sirahs among the wines.

of the 260 acres planted here. They were the sole Livermore winery represented.

Petite peaked statewide in 1976 with 14,215 acres planted: it suffered massive decline to a low of 1,738 measly acres in 1995, but has been enjoying a renaissance with about 7,320 acres planted as of 2008. Producers of the variety have gone from a low of 65 to the present 620.

Data presented by Christian Miller of Full Glass Research, emphasized the Pet glass is half

empty now, hut certainly half-filled with opportunity. First and foremost, clear up the confusion between Syrah and Petite Sirah. 46% of those surveyed did not know the difference between them or thought they were synonyms. Most said they knew little about Petite Sirah (45%), 31% associated it with CA and 21% said it makes dark, intense and tannic wines. Only 7% thought it could not achieve the same quality as Pinot or Cabernet. Most Petites sell in the \$15 to \$20 price range,

and most Pet-based blends carry unique proprietary names. Top complaints from producers are lack of consumer awareness, followed by lack of restaurant and retail support.

Although Petite was bred in the south of France, it only took off in California and is found nowhere else. Prone to wood disease and virus, the oldest Petite Sirah still hangs on in field blends. Bill Pease of Madrigal Vineyards hailed proper drainage and avoiding stressful chemical as key to preserving “vines clinging to the very edge of life” in an old vineyard in Napa.

David Gates of Ridge said that 85% of their Petite Sirah goes into Zin blends: “That huge sucking sound is Zinfandel crying out for Petite Sirah!”

John Monnich of Silkwood suggested bunchrot, to which Petite’s tightfisted clusters are quite prone, could be reduced via root boosting. Strategic applications of a high oxin seaweed extract (Kelpac) prior to bloom, then 21 days after, yields longer, looser bunches. Rot has gone from 40% to a max of 4%, with no flavor impact.

Where Petite grows makes a big difference in resulting style. It likes heat, but not necessarily sun, and produces more intensity on gravelly soil than clay: it also seems to benefit from altitude, which brings cooler nights for flavor and acid retention.

Standouts at the tasting were newcomers Fortress from Red Hills in Lake County (at 2k feet), Szabo Vineyards from Nevada

City (1200 ft), and Spangler from Rogue River in Oregon (2200 ft). These wines personified Petite’s intensity, without overwhelming the palate with monster tannins and overripeness. Instead, they were beautifully bold and spicy, with a clean raciness of blueberry fruit that presented a real contrast to the leaden, high pH offerings from Mendocino and Lodi. Aver Vineyards first effort (2006) from San Martin was perfectly spicy and feisty, but as smooth as a high gloss shine on a vintage Corvette. VINO Robles from Paso Robles pulled off a beauty, and Clayhouse (Paso) was a pleasant surprise. The 2004 Dynamite Hill from Ridge was something to ponder for an-

other decade. Guenoc’s Serpentine Meadow Petite from Lake County under the Langtry label was filled with lavender, roses and cloves.

Petite done right is a mouth-filling, teeth-staining delight, like eating blueberry pie. Now why can’t someone invent a special water that really does rinse out the pigment and tannin that builds up when tasting this powerfully pigmented pucker prince?

Concannon can’t carry the entire weight of Petite Sirah in this region. It would sure be nice to see more Livermore wineries joining this gathering of Petite-ophiles. But don’t hold your breath. There is a much more fun way to turn blue.



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