

California Wine and Food



A Moment in Time on the Blue Tooth Tour By Dan Clarke

When Jo Diaz of Petite Sirah's educational and promotional arm, PS I Love You, called I was intrigued. Would I like to join a few other writers for a broad tasting of their wines, she asked?

Yes, I would consider driving a couple of hours to one of the member wineries that I presumed might be hosting such an event. "No, Dan, this is the Blue Tooth Tour," she explained. "We're taking a couple of private rail cars down the Coast from Seattle. We'll be hosting tasting events in Seattle, Portland and Los Angeles. We're suggesting you and your colleagues meet the train Thursday afternoon in Santa Barbara. We'll taste some wines and have dinner on the way on the way into Los Angeles and you can fly back the following day."

It was an offer difficult to refuse.

I like Petite Sirah. It has been a significant part of California's wine picture for a long time. Like before Prohibition. Even before the 20th Century. Always a valued blending grape, it's been bottled as its own varietal since the mid-1960s.

It's understandable that Petite Sirah is often confused with Syrah, the predominant red grape of the northern Rhone Valley in France. Petite Sirah, also known as Durif, originated from the crossing of Syrah and the old French variety



Comin' in to Los Angeles.

Peloursin. While one of its parent varieties is the original Syrah, it ought not be dismissed as merely a step-child. This Petite Sirah grape is quite capable of producing big, complex wines (powerful enough to turn your teeth blue?) that are worthy of respect for their own merits. I remembered a vertical tasting of perhaps a dozen examples at the Foppiano Winery in Healdsburg about 15 years ago that was a revelation. Lou Foppiano was to be bringing recent vintages to our tasting-on-rails. So would Jim Concannon of Livermore, whose winery was

the first to bottle Petite Sirah as its own varietal and is the primary sponsor of this most creative series of events. Maybe a dozen other producers would also be there.

The West Coast swing was in late February. Next month the same exercise will be repeated for the benefit of press, trade and a few devotees of the variety in the center of the country. On May 9th the on-board tasting will be presented for the Dallas/Ft. Worth audience. On the 11th, the train will stop in St. Louis and two days later the tasting will be repeated in Chicago.

I had looked forward to experiencing that purportedly beautiful stretch of rail line that hugs the Ventura County coastline south of Santa Barbara, but it was not to be. Substantial and nearly continual rains in February caused Amtrak to suspend all rail travel in that area. The train tour might have been truncated but the tasting would be held in Los Angeles regardless. And in private rail cars yet. Apparently, the company that provided the cars Amtrak was hauling south for the winemakers maintains several other private cars and two were parked on a siding at Union Station in LA that would do just fine.

I met Byron McCluskey of Tower Aviation at Sacramento Jet Center. About 20 minutes after take off we were at Napa's airport where we picked Paul Franson of NapaLife and Cyril Penn of Wine Business. Another third of an hour in the air and we were landing at Oakland where Charlie Olken of Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine and Darryl Roberts of Wine X joined us. In only a little more time than a large commercial jet would have taken, we were in Southern California touching down at the Burbank airport. While I couldn't stand up in the Turbo Commander, there was more leg room than on commercial flights, even more than business class provides—a trade-off I'd make any day. I was through four airports in less than three hours. At no time did any of us have to stand in line. We weren't required to remove our shoes or run our garment bags and briefcases through x-ray machines. On arrival at Burbank, polite young men were unloading our bags before the props stopped turning. Truly, this was a civil way to travel.



All aboard!

Later, a car picked us up at the Burbank Hilton and headed for Union Station. At four in the afternoon traffic was congested even going into Los Angeles—or so it seemed to a writer who is thankful he doesn't have to live there.

We were greeted by several of the Petite Sirah producers and Steve Pitcher, who had written a major piece on the variety last year in *The Wine News*. He had taken the train down from Seattle. The first of the two refurbished cars, once the pride of Rail Canada, actually had the kind of platform at the back you could use to make a whistle-stop speech—or just enjoy a glass of wine and an hors d'oeuvre.

The evening was an altogether pleasant experience—educational, to be sure, but not the circumstances that lend themselves to single-minded analysis and the taking of copious tasting notes. We sampled wines through a reception on the tartan-decorated Scottish Thistle and adjourned to the next car where we enjoyed an excellent dinner provided by the chefs who'd been with the tour since Seattle. Their chores might have been easier for the fact that the kitchen wasn't moving, but their galley was no more commodious when the train was stationary.

More than a dozen winery representatives had brought multiple examples of their products. They had assembled in a collective educational effort for their favorite variety, but winemakers are independent types. Diversity ruled. Their grapes came from quite different regions and climates. Winemaking styles varied.

None of the wineries represented makes a huge amount of Petite Sirah, but Marr Cellars must have been the smallest. Owner/winemaker Bob Marr makes his wine in Woodland, which is in Yolo County, east of Sacramento. Of the several varieties he bottles, Petite Sirah accounts for about 200 cases of his total production each year. The wine retails for \$27. “There are actually some regional and personal characteristics that these winemakers can bring to the variety,” he told me. His Petite Sirah is grown at an elevation of about 2400 feet in Tehama County. From this fruit, “structure is a given,” he said, “so it's very important to handle the grapes so that you bring forward the quality of the fruit.” Minimal handling and minimal maceration are his preference.



Paul Franson explains the latest in digital cameras to Cyril Penn, Helen Concannon and David Bruce.

Dan Teldeschi's family has farmed in the Dry Creek Valley of Sonoma County for over 100 years. Though he makes Zinfandel and a Rhone-style blended wine, he considers his F. Teldeschi Winery a specialist in Petite Sirah. One vineyard block of the variety dates to 1915, though he admits that their newer sections of vineyard yield fruit that is more abundant and maybe a little less tannic. One of the proponents of adding some Petite Sirah to achieve a better Zinfandel, Teldeschi also blends a little Zin into his bottlings of Petite Sirah. Though the percentages vary with the vintage, he also prefers to include some Carignan and Valdiguié, which give a "more forward fruit" characteristic he prefers. He says he has learned from David Bruce to treat Petite Sirah more like Pinot Noir, with gentler handling and cooler fermentations.

Clarksburg is an appellation just south of Sacramento whose vineyards provide good quality fruit at prices well below those of coastal regions and where red grapes have a juicy, pronounced fruit character. Ken Wilson is a long-time grower there and recently has developed his own Wilson Vineyards wines specializing in Chenin Blanc and Petite Sirah. Though situated in California's Sacramento Valley, the area has a cooler climate than one might suspect. "We're surrounded by water," observed Wilson. "There are the rivers, the sloughs, the deep-water channel, and then we have that Delta breeze. His winery's debut Petite Sirah carried a California appellation and was made from grapes from outside his region, but beginning with the 2003 vintage the fruit source will be 100% Clarksburg.

Parducci makes 13-15,000 cases of Petite Sirah each year. Winemaker Bob Swain anticipates that increased plantings in the county will allow him to make his Petite Sirah entirely from Mendocino fruit. His style is to make a wine that's "a little more approachable than some of the others. At the price point (\$9.99 retail), I'm making one that can be pulled off the shelf and drunk that night." The winery is soon to begin bottling limited production versions of this variety priced around \$28. These are likely to have more tannin and exhibit briary, white pepper characteristics. Is Swain fond of the variety? He has two cats. One, a small female, is named Petite. The other, a male, is Sirah.

In August of 2002 there were 67 producers of Petite Sirah in the U.S. This number has since grown to 244, nearly all of which are in California (two are in the state of Washington and one is in Wisconsin!). Jo Diaz refers to the variety as a "heritage grape" and considers it an American legend in the same way John Wayne fits that definition. "It's not mainstream," she explains, "though it may become a cult. The people who come to these events are as passionate as the vintners themselves."



Bob Marr prefers a light winemaking touch.

Editor's note: More information about Petite Sirah can be had at www.psiloveyou.org. Fans of the variety interested in attending the tastings on the Blue Tooth Tour train in Dallas/Ft. Worth, St. Louis or Chicago may phone Melanie at 707 620-0788.