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Que Syrah?

A primer on Syrah, Petite Syrah and Shiraz.

By Francis Fecteau

It's a wine business insider's joke: "What's the difference between gonorrhea and Syrah?" Answer: "You can get rid of gonorrhea." Ba-dum-bum!

Funny? Hell, yes. A shame? Hell, yes. Surrounded by wine dorks, though, it's a surefire knee-slapper. Syrah's disrespect is an unfortunate fate for the oldest charted grape variety in the world, one with DNA evidence from the upper reaches of the Rhone River valley dating it back almost 4,000 years. Pinot Noir has had its moment in the spotlight. I happen to think Syrah deserves a little love.

Simple economic realities created a flood of amazing Syrah-based wines from every viable patch of dirt in the Western United States. It's officially on the comeback trail, an odd thing for an ancient variety. Pinot Noir prices having risen steadily (thanks to "that movie" *Sideways*) for several years, leaving many winemakers unable and/or unwilling to buy Pinot Noir grapes on contract. And if they grew it, they sold it for top dollar, creating an ever-increasing tide of expensive, forgettable Pinot Noir. Winemakers who found it untenable to keep pumping out \$60-per-bottle Pinot Noir looked for other things to make, and found Syrah. Syrah isn't as fussy as Pinot Noir, nor does it require the same degree of close attention in the vineyard.



Syrah, Petite Syrah and Shiraz are not the same thing. Armed with a few simple facts, Syrah is easy to understand. The parent grape is called "Midi" or Syrah. This grape Midi/Syrah was crossbred with another grape called Peloursin in the mid-19th century, creating a variation on Syrah which was named "Durif," after the nurseryman who came up with the idea. Durif then came to be known as "Petite Syrah".

The differences are marked. Much of what comes out of Australia labeled as Shiraz is Durif. There is a portion of "Shiraz" that is the actual-no-kidding-real-deal Syrah known as Midi. Taste Petite Syrah next to a range of Aussie offerings and the monolithic blackberry punch makes it clear that the two are indeed related. Taste Australia next to the really stinky horse-s—t-inflected stuff from Hermitage in the Northern Rhone, and the differences become dramatic. Granted, some of this is attributable to soil and environs, but the expression on the palate really confirms the similarities and the differences.



Syrah is a perfect grape for this schizophrenic season of spring. It can offer tremendous power and punch when the snow reappears, and for those early flashes of spring, it can also show a Pinot Noir-like range of expression and raciness that makes the mouth water.

Syrah now offers the absolute best bang for the buck in domestically produced wines. Twenty dollars goes a very long way in the wine store's Syrah section. I suggest greeting spring with friends: Each of you grab an incarnation of Syrah, Shiraz or Petite Syrah—French, Aussie, Washington or California. Make it a party; taste and compare.

Start with the "textbook" renditions—that is, wines that show varietal accuracy. Rosenblum makes terrifically affordable stuff; look for the **Heritage Clones Petite Syrah** (\$16) or the **Vintner's Cuvee Syrah** (\$14). **Magnificent Wine Company SyrahChteau Pesquié Quintessence** (\$24) from France's Cote du Ventoux offers a rustic chunky experience of the real deal. **Tapestry Wines** produces an inky, black \$20 Shiraz and a personal favorite comes from Paso Robles, the **Clos Mimi "Petite Rousse" Syrah** (\$20); it's a dead ringer for the really good French stuff. You can always save the kinkier renditions for later—and believe you me, there are plenty more. (\$20) from Washington offers terrific balance and ripeness without being overdone, while **Chteau Pesquié Quintessence** (\$24) from France's Cote du Ventoux offers a rustic chunky experience of the real deal. **Tapestry Wines** produces an inky, black \$20 Shiraz and a personal favorite comes from Paso Robles, the **Clos Mimi "Petite Rousse" Syrah** (\$20); it's a dead ringer for the really good French stuff. You can always save the kinkier renditions for later—and believe you me, there are plenty more.

