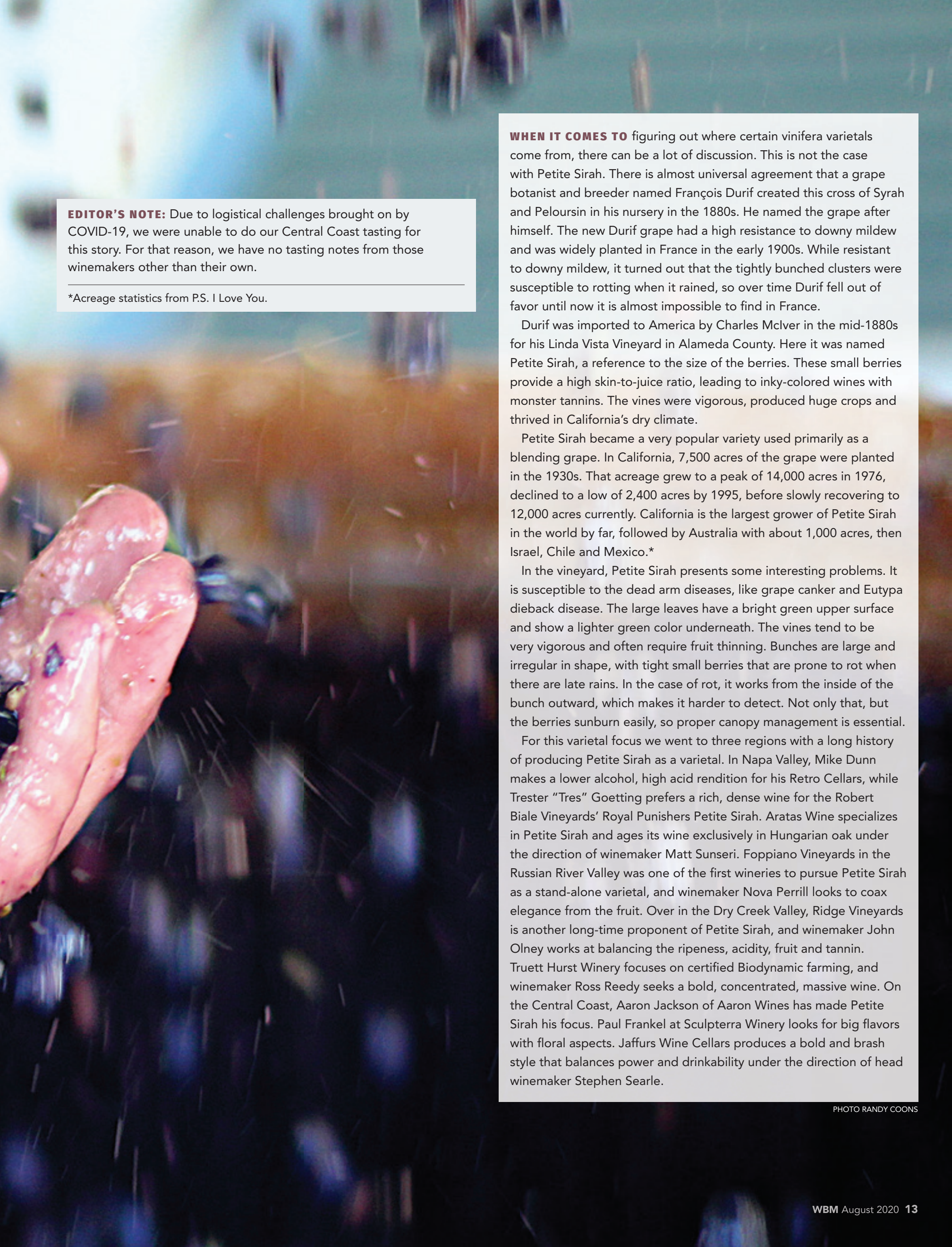


Varietal Focus: *Petite Sirah*

Lance Cutler

Lance Cutler has been a working winemaker in Sonoma Valley for 40 years. He has been a contributing editor for *Wine Business Monthly* for 15 years. His unique perspective on winemaking has led to our Industry Roundtable series and our Varietal Focus series. Lance is also the author of five Jake Lorenzo books and *The Tequila Lover's Guide to Mexico*.



EDITOR'S NOTE: Due to logistical challenges brought on by COVID-19, we were unable to do our Central Coast tasting for this story. For that reason, we have no tasting notes from those winemakers other than their own.

*Acreage statistics from P.S. I Love You.

WHEN IT COMES TO figuring out where certain vinifera varieties come from, there can be a lot of discussion. This is not the case with Petite Sirah. There is almost universal agreement that a grape botanist and breeder named François Durif created this cross of Syrah and Peloursin in his nursery in the 1880s. He named the grape after himself. The new Durif grape had a high resistance to downy mildew and was widely planted in France in the early 1900s. While resistant to downy mildew, it turned out that the tightly bunched clusters were susceptible to rotting when it rained, so over time Durif fell out of favor until now it is almost impossible to find in France.

Durif was imported to America by Charles McIver in the mid-1880s for his Linda Vista Vineyard in Alameda County. Here it was named Petite Sirah, a reference to the size of the berries. These small berries provide a high skin-to-juice ratio, leading to inky-colored wines with monster tannins. The vines were vigorous, produced huge crops and thrived in California's dry climate.

Petite Sirah became a very popular variety used primarily as a blending grape. In California, 7,500 acres of the grape were planted in the 1930s. That acreage grew to a peak of 14,000 acres in 1976, declined to a low of 2,400 acres by 1995, before slowly recovering to 12,000 acres currently. California is the largest grower of Petite Sirah in the world by far, followed by Australia with about 1,000 acres, then Israel, Chile and Mexico.*

In the vineyard, Petite Sirah presents some interesting problems. It is susceptible to the dead arm diseases, like grape canker and Eutypa dieback disease. The large leaves have a bright green upper surface and show a lighter green color underneath. The vines tend to be very vigorous and often require fruit thinning. Bunches are large and irregular in shape, with tight small berries that are prone to rot when there are late rains. In the case of rot, it works from the inside of the bunch outward, which makes it harder to detect. Not only that, but the berries sunburn easily, so proper canopy management is essential.

For this varietal focus we went to three regions with a long history of producing Petite Sirah as a varietal. In Napa Valley, Mike Dunn makes a lower alcohol, high acid rendition for his Retro Cellars, while Trester "Tres" Goetting prefers a rich, dense wine for the Robert Biale Vineyards' Royal Punishers Petite Sirah. Aratas Wine specializes in Petite Sirah and ages its wine exclusively in Hungarian oak under the direction of winemaker Matt Sunseri. Foppiano Vineyards in the Russian River Valley was one of the first wineries to pursue Petite Sirah as a stand-alone varietal, and winemaker Nova Perrill looks to coax elegance from the fruit. Over in the Dry Creek Valley, Ridge Vineyards is another long-time proponent of Petite Sirah, and winemaker John Olney works at balancing the ripeness, acidity, fruit and tannin. Truett Hurst Winery focuses on certified Biodynamic farming, and winemaker Ross Reedy seeks a bold, concentrated, massive wine. On the Central Coast, Aaron Jackson of Aaron Wines has made Petite Sirah his focus. Paul Frankel at Sculpterra Winery looks for big flavors with floral aspects. Jaffurs Wine Cellars produces a bold and brash style that balances power and drinkability under the direction of head winemaker Stephen Searle.

PHOTO RANDY COONS

Ridge Vineyards

2017 Lytton Estate Petite Sirah

John Olney is the chief operating officer and winemaker at Ridge Vineyards, Lytton Springs. He was introduced to Europe and wine at an early age by his uncle, food and wine writer Richard Olney. He attended Lycée Viticole in Burgundy to learn wine-making. He worked at Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant before starting in the cellar at Ridge, Montebello in 1996. He became assistant winemaker/general manager in 1999 and then moved on as vice president of winemaking at Lytton Springs. He has been COO since 2016.



According to the winemaker:

Stylistically, what we are trying to do with our Petite Sirah is bring elegance to a rustic variety. We want a wine that is balanced in terms of ripeness, acidity, fruit emphasis and especially tannin. At the same time, we want a wine that showcases aromatics reminiscent of its Syrah parentage, intense color and full-coated tannins. We like floral hints, mineral and wet stone. Controlling the tannins is always the biggest challenge with Petite Sirah.

Our Petite Sirah comes from several different blocks within our vineyard. It is mostly gravelly loam soil, shifting to clay loam as we move to flatter areas. Elevations run between 225 and 275 feet, and vines are spaced in 8x6-foot rows. We harvest six different blocks and ferment those blocks separately. Depending on the block, the vines go from 10- to 45-years-old.

We have some FPS 04 and 05 clones, but the vines are predominantly FPS 03 planted on 110 R and 1103P rootstock, with just a bit of St. George. The oldest block is massale selection. We use drip, as needed, to give deep, infrequent irrigation. We are 85 percent certified organic with 15 percent in transition to organic. Vines are primarily head-trained and spur-pruned. We do an early drop of the huge bunches but very little leaf-pulling because typical canopy leaves the grapes already exposed. Production averages between 2 and 4 tons per acre, depending on the block.

We track numbers until 21° Brix; then we are out in the vineyard, observing and tasting. We watch the leaves for color change, observe the crop load and watch the weather. We are looking for enough ripeness in the grapes. We prefer lower sugars to give us more acidity, but we want no green flavors if we can avoid them, and we look for sweetness in the grape. Typical harvest numbers are between 23.5 and 24° Brix with pH in the 3.45 to 3.55 range.

Grapes are hand-picked into bins or gondolas at night. They are field-sorted. At the winery they are de-stemmed but not crushed, looking for whole berry fermentations. We add 35 ppm SO₂ to de-stemmed grapes. Cold from the night pick, they cold-soak for 24 to 36 hours, waiting for indigenous yeast to start. We rarely need to make acid additions, and we do not add nutrients.

Grapes are fermented in 5- to 7-ton stainless steel, open-top tanks with submerged cap, which gives us a very gentle extraction. We pump-over twice daily initially, reduced to once daily around 12° to 15° Brix. Fermentation maxes out at 80° F to 84° F. We press once we have developed a good fruit expression, and once we have a good tannin layer but before it turns astringent. This means we often press between 2° and 5° Brix. We add the first

press juice (up to 1 bar) to the free run. The rest of the press portion is kept separate for possible inclusion later.

The wine goes to tank for native malolactic although about 20 percent of the wine goes directly to barrel. After malolactic finishes, we transition to minimal additions of SO₂ about 25 ppm then none unless specific need calls for an add. We use 100 percent American oak barrels with 15 to 20 percent new oak. We are also working with 1,100-gallon casks. We age in barrel for 14 months, racking every three months post-ML. The wine is pad-filtered to .5 micron and is bottle-aged for one year before release.

TASTING NOTES



OLNEY: I get some nice floral notes on the nose with some black cherry fruit. It's a real pure expression of the fruit. A bit of vanilla spice comes through from the oak. On the palate this has medium weight. There is a nice elegance to the tannins, making it long on the palate. The fruit flavor turns to blackberry, with some minerality. There is some grip to the tannins, but they are well-coated and balanced. The acidity is good but not razor sharp.

REEDY: You don't often describe Petite Sirah as elegant, but this has an elegance and poise that are very rare. Beautiful nose with nice floral aromatics, bright cherry fruit and a real freshness to it. You've done a great job managing tannins, and you've done a great job of making the mid-palate push through. You have soft and silky tannins that coat but then finish long, and I like the acidity at the end. Very elegant wine.

PERRILL: Petites can be almost unapproachable in their youth, but this wine is a much more elegant version. It almost plays as bigger Zinfandel. The Zin in the blend is harmonious and appropriate. I get cherry, racy acid, which makes this a fruit-friendly Petite Sirah. It seems like it will last a long time in the bottle.

SUNSERI: Different style and less ripe. There is some smoke with some citrus or melon, and the tannins are a bit grippy and forceful on the finish.

DUNN: I get a bit of matchstick. Definitely classic-style Petite. It is young but should age well. Good job on tannins with less ripe fruit.

GOETTING: Aromatics are a bit hidden. Real complex flavors, which make me think it is a blend. There are things here besides Petite Sirah, which is where the herbal is coming from. A little tight on the finish and an Older style.

Foppiano Vineyards

2016 Gianna's Block Petite Sirah

Nova Perrill graduated from California State University, San Luis Obispo. He started his wine career as assistant winemaker and viticulturalist at Mount Eden Vineyards. Looking to expand beyond small-batch boutique winemaking, he moved to Dry Creek Vineyards in 2008 as assistant winemaker. Seven years at Dry Creek taught him about several varieties and how to work with large lots of wine. He was hired as winemaker at Foppiano Vineyards in 2015.



According to the winemaker:

We want to make an authentic Petite Sirah that shows its dark color, tannins and deep fruit, but does so in an elegant way. We want to harness the fruit in a way that isolates and spreads out the flavors. We like complexing components of coffee and cocoa, but we want everything in balance. We look for a lush mid-palate and a long finish.

The grapes for this wine come from a single block known as Gianna's Block. The soil is Pleasanton Loam, and it sits by the river at about 110 feet in elevation. Vine spacing is 7x11 feet. The vines are head-trained. The clone is Foppiano Selection from the 1890s planted to St. George rootstock. The vines are 50 years old; and because this block is near the river, the water table is high, so we only irrigate in the face of severe heat to moisten the ground and protect the vines. We farm traditionally with an eye on using as little synthetic material as possible. We plant cover crops and use organic sprays where possible.

Petite Sirah has tight clusters and thin skins, making it susceptible to rot, so we leaf-thin within the canopy to increase airflow. We also de-clump and drop clusters to prevent rot. We are basically trying to make a visual umbrella with airflow in the center. Average production over a five-year period is 2.2 tons per acre.

We rely a lot on experienced family members and our vineyard manager on when to pick. Signs of shrivel are key. We look for dimpling of the skins and turgidity of the fruit, with some give to the berries. We require a minimum of 24.5° Brix to obtain mature tannins.

Fruit is hand-harvested and vineyard-sorted. Fruit is de-stemmed with no crushing. If it is very clean, whole cluster is a good option. We add 50 ppm SO₂ at the crusher to kill bacteria and get a clean start to fermentation. We do not cold soak. We use Premier Cuvée yeast, which I like because it is very neutral, gets the wine dry and allows the estate character to be unmasked by yeast flavors. We rarely add acid and then only if pH is over 3.8 at harvest. Nutrients are always low in this vineyard, so we will add complex nutrient in equal proportion to DAP, 1.5 to 3 lbs/K, depending on need. Usually one dose with a second if aromatics are not appealing.

Wine ferments in 5-ton open-top stainless tanks. We pump over twice a day, one minute per ton. Once we hit 5° Brix, we reduce that to one pump-over daily. Sometimes I'll set the tank thermostat at 90° F, other times as low as 75° F. It depends on my mood, and I have not seen a big difference in the outcome. It is elusive to predict when to press, but we look at the acid and tannin of the must. Press and free run fractions are combined but only up to

one bar. The wine is pressed to tank where it settles on lees for three months; then it gets racked to barrel.

Native malolactic occurs in tank or barrel. We sulfur as soon as malolactic finishes; if that happens early in tank, great, or not until February in barrel. We use 100 percent once-filled French oak, trying for less tannin from new oak while still getting what we require in oak aromas and flavors. We barrel-age 20 to 24 months, topping monthly. We do no racking unless the wine is getting reductive, or we need to adjust oak impact. I've gone 24 months without racking. Wine is pad-filtered to sterile membrane for bottling. With the length of barrel-aging, this wine is ready to drink at bottling, so release is really based on supply and demand.

TASTING NOTES



PERRILL: I get nice black cherry, almost ripe blackberry aromatics. Some subtle spice from the oak, which is really nice, almost a clove aroma. There is no white pepper, which can be common to Petite Sirah but not ours. The flavor profile matches the aromatics with that dark cherry, ripe blackberry and some brambly tannin in the finish, which is appropriate and enjoyable. This will soften over time. Really nice viscosity with plump mid-palate and a sense of sweetness. It comes off as luscious.



REEDY: I get a lot of blue fruit, blueberry and violet that I love. It also has dark blackberry and a hint of savory notes, giving more complexity. I get oak-inspired Graham cracker and cocoa. This wine is big on the palate but balanced. Everything is elevated, so you have larger fruit with big soft tannins. I think the oak-aging helps

that out. The finish is bold. There is a perception of sweetness, but it makes the wine lush, keeping the palate full and elongated.



OLNEY: It is immediately recognizable as Petite Sirah. It is dark all around. There is an intense, focused blackberry fruit but with complexity from the oak with nutmeg and chocolate. The palate is jammy plum without being too ripe. Balanced and viscous with great concentration. So, you get this great expression of fruit, and then on the end you get the tannins, which match the fullness of the fruit. There is a full tannic backbone on the finish but with a nice roundness in the long finish.



GOETTING: Classic Petite Sirah. Brambly, earthy aromatics. Real clean entry and soft. No angles on entry. It does evolve to become a bit angular and tight on the finish. Very nice wine.



SUNSERI: I get blueberry, crème brûlée and some nice sweetness on the entry. There is some powdered sugar on the nose with vanilla and some sandalwood and spice. A seamless wine with lovely control on tannins.



DUNN: Rich, ripe classic dark black fruit with cassis. Some oak influence with a soft palate. Certainly not too tannic. Riper fruit with less tannin.

Truett Hurst Winery

2016 Estate Petite Sirah

Ross Reedy started making wine at home with his father from their vineyard in the Alexander Valley. He studied wine and viticulture at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. After graduation, he travelled the world, working in cellars and labs in Australia, New Zealand, Argentina and Napa Valley, before returning to Sonoma County where he took a position at Truett Hurst and VML Winery.



According to the winemaker:

Our style goals are all about concentration and power with balance as the fruit and tannin work in perfect harmony. We like blue and black fruit with soft tannins that are not granular. We look for a wine with seamless movement from front to back with a long and lush finish.

This Petite Sirah comes from our home ranch. It is located on the valley floor near Dry Creek on sandy, clay loam and volcanic soils. Vines are planted in 8x6-foot spacings on 101-14 rootstock, but we don't know the clones. The vineyard is certified Biodynamic and does not present us with very many problems. Our vineyard practices are all about boots on the ground. We do a lot of thinning and often one bud-pruning to focus on low yields in our pursuit of concentration.

Determining when to pick is based on flavor, physiological status of grape and vine, chemistry and weather. We look for the tannins to move from hard to soft. We often do more than one pick. Grapes are hand-picked, cluster-sorted, de-stemmed and pressed, and then cold-soaked for six days at 53° F, after adding 35 ppm SO₂. We start fermentation using RP15 yeast and make acid additions at the crusher. We add Microessential nutrient twice at 22° and 19° Brix. Grapes are fermented in stainless steel tanks with a portion fermenting in new French oak barrels. We do both punch-downs and pump-overs. Fermentation temperatures max out at 86° F.

We taste the wine, watching the build-up of tannic astringency to determine when to press. Free run and press juice are combined and inoculated with ML before going to barrel where malolactic will finish. We rack to barrels based on tannins in the wine. About 30 percent of this wine went to new French oak barrels for nine months, and 50 percent went to new French oak for five months. Total time in barrel was 14 months, and the wine was racked after nine months in barrel and again for bottling. The wine was cross-flow-filtered and aged in bottle for 18 months before release.

TASTING NOTES



REEDY: This is big with large aromatics. A lot of blue fruit, dark blackberry and a ton of chocolate and Graham cracker from the oak. On the palate, the tannins are fine with more blackberry, and it is really mouth-coating. As you drink it, it spreads front to back and all the sides. Finish is soft and smooth. This wine should age very well.

OLNEY: It is a fruit-forward style, and I get a lot of blackberry and black cherry on the nose. There is a lot of oak, but the wine carries it very well. There is a nice purity to the nose with mint and leather but without a whack of oak. It is well done. On the palate the fruit is toward the black spectrum, very present with great viscosity. The tannins are very fine and spread out on the palate. It is a bold style. A wine that should age a long time.

PERRILL: It is massive in a good way. Not extreme but appropriate Dry Creek Petite Sirah. Your focus on concentration and tannin management comes through crystal clear. This is up front with unapologetic fruit and big girth and then finishes as smooth as Petite Sirah can. The control of concentration and the smoothness of the finish make this so pleasurable on the palate.

DUNN: There are some stemmy, plum aromatics, maybe some raisin character. It is viscous with dark black fruit flavors. On the riper spectrum, most likely a crowd-pleaser.

GOETTING: This is a big style. Seems to be high pH with some residual sugar, which is why it is so nice and weighty and soft on the entry. I got interesting chocolate, caramel and black fruit. It was picked super ripe, and the RS is masked by a bit too much oak.

SUNSERI: A bit too ripe for me. Aromas of a struggling ferment for me. Has a Jolly Rancher character with wild strawberry, violets and plum.

Retro Cellars

2013 Elevation Petite Sirah

Mike Dunn grew up on Howell Mountain at his father's famous Dunn Vineyards. He helped work in the vineyards and with the early harvests before striking out on his own. He graduated from UC Santa Barbara with an anthropology degree and then owned a bike shop in Calistoga for close to 14 years. He returned to Dunn



Vineyards in 1999 as a cellar worker, eventually taking on wine production responsibilities and working with the vineyard team in 2002. Along with his wife Kara, he started making wine for his own Retro Cellars in 2003.

According to the winemaker:

I make a cold-climate Petite Sirah, lower in alcohol and higher in acidity than warmer locations. Petite has intense fruit character. I try to enhance black cherry and blue fruit components. Petite can also be a tannic monster so I am doing all I can to tame the tannin of the beast.

This vineyard is on Howell Mountain at 1,850 feet. The soil is porous stone and a dusty brown color. The vineyard was planted in 1980, but we have no idea which clones were used. We have discovered that many of the vines are Peloursin, not Petite Sirah. The rootstock is probably St. George. The old vineyard uses 10x12-foot spacings. We have replanted sections using a 5x9-foot spacing. This vineyard is dry-farmed and farmed traditionally. We do a lot of thinning but no leaf-pulling. Petite clusters tend to grow into one another and must be separated early. Yield in the old vineyard is sparse, about 1 ton per acre. The replanted section gets 3 to 4 tons per acre.

To pick, we taste, check weather, look at vine development and track tannin development. We chew the seeds, waiting for the tannins to lose astringency. We wait for some dappling on the skin and for the flavor to develop into a deeper fruit taste. The vines get little or no afternoon sun. Sections with Peloursin are hard to get up to 24° Brix while sections without Peloursin can reach 25° to 26° Brix.

We pick into half-ton bins. We have no sorting table, but clusters are sorted in the field at harvest. Grapes are crushed and de-stemmed. We add 50 ppm SO₂ at the crusher. We let the must sit for one day, but there is no formal cold soak. We inoculate with D254 yeast, rarely make acid additions and will sometimes use nutrients if YAN levels are low, which is rare because we harvest at lower sugars. We ferment in closed-top stainless steel tanks. We pump-over using the fire hose method twice a day to start and then increasing to three to four times daily as the fermentation takes off, but the pump-overs are of short duration. Toward the end of fermentation, we use our hands to deflect the spray for a gentler pump-over.

We press at 0° Brix, mixing the free run and press fractions. The wine settles in a tank for one week where it is inoculated for malolactic. It gets racked to 100 percent new French oak barrels. We add 50 ppm SO₂ after malolactic and rack the wine. Thereafter, the wine gets racked every six months during its 31 to 32 months of barrel-aging. The wine gets sterile pad filtration and then two years of bottle age before release.

TASTING NOTES



DUNN: Compared to the other two in this flight the fruit is a bit muted, which is characteristic of Howell Mountain. There is a smoky sense. It is balanced with a spice character of cumin or coriander. It has more forward tannin than the other two wines. It is still young. I find it very balanced, with more red fruit than blue or black and some cassis.

GOETTING: I like this wine. It falls in the middle of the other two wines. The aromas are faint but pleasant. It is round, rich and opulent. The wine has a soft entry with that rare combination of blue, black and red fruit. There is a nice hint of dusty cocoa powder. Overall great balance with nice tannin integration.

SUNSERI: I have smoke as a characteristic, along with meaty leather aromas. I get some anise and black fruit, along with cocoa and menthol. It has forward tannins that are just about right, not over the top.

PERRILL: Old World style Italian in the sense that it is nice wine with lots of character. Aromatics and flavors getting close to VA and possibly a bit of Brett, but those are flavor aspects of wines made in that style. It is not flawed by any means. It is a very fine line, and I respect his ability to walk that line. Tasty with nice balance and great aromatics. I like it for what it is.

REEDY: I really like this wine. It was delightfully animalistic. There was some Brett on it, which is a style choice. It reminds me of an Old World Italian wine. Beautiful structure that is soft and smooth, really tight and sophisticated with some chalkiness on the finish. It finishes with Petite character and firm tannins. Great and interesting wine.

OLNEY: I like the nose. It wasn't jammy or too ripe. I got a lot of cigar, cedar and tobacco that drove the aromas. On the palate, there were chalky tannins, but they were balanced with the dark cherry fruit. This wine didn't dress the fruity style of Petite Sirah. It had an earthiness to it that I think is one of the hallmarks of Petite, so I liked it for that.



Aratas Wines

2012 Napa Valley Petite Sirah

Matt Sunseri graduated with a degree in viticulture and enology from UC Davis. He has worked alongside a gallery of famous winemakers, including Helen Turley, Heidi Barrett, Paul Hobbs and Steve Rogstad. He is the assistant winemaker at Cuvaision and is also currently the winemaker for Aratas Wines.



According to the winemaker:

We strive to let Petite Sirah show its abundant nature. Our focus is to create wines with a firm mid-palate and muscular structure but with expressive redolent fruit that shows a little restraint. We love the subtle, exotic spice imparted to wine from aging in Hungarian oak. We age our wines longer than most to allow dynamic fruit and acidity to integrate and give way to terroir expression.

These grapes come from two parcels in Oak Knoll District. Parcel A was planted in 1999 and Parcel B a few years later. The vineyard is on the valley floor west of Soda Canyon Rd. It has alluvial, well-drained soil, primarily gravelly clay loam. Vine spacing is 8x6 feet, and the elevation is between 575 and 600 feet. Parcel A uses 1103 P rootstock, and Parcel B is on 3309. Both parcels use Clone 3. We use sporadic irrigation as needed.

We fruit-thin by color, as well as de-gloving as a protocol. Vines were leafed once for dappled sunlight and airflow. Vines were topped at veraison to redirect carbohydrates. A focus on berry size is crucial. Petite tends to have a large canopy and vigorous cluster size. Controlling that size is crucial to prevent crowding and bunch rot within the clusters.

To pick we use a combination of Brix (26° to 27°) acid and pH review. We look for seed browning and evaluate the canopy. We watch shoot tips, wait for slightly drooping leaves and softening skins. Grapes are hand-harvested at sunrise. They are hand-sorted, followed by an optical sorting via Pellenc Selectiv' Vision 2, which gives us a natural juice bleed of 2.5 to 5 percent. That juice is not returned. We added 40 ppm SO₂ at the crusher. We moved 10 percent of the fruit directly to barrels for whole cluster fermentation. The rest was de-stemmed into tank and cold-soaked for five days, using dry ice in a 52° F cellar in open tanks and 1-ton bins.

We made no acid additions but used 1 pound per 1,000 gallons DAP and Fermaid at 20° Brix. Fermentation was carried out by native yeast, with maximum temperatures reaching 88° F. We used one daily pump-over until the start of fermentation then twice daily pump-overs until 20° Brix. We shift to three pump-overs until 0° Brix when we pump-over just once a day until dry. All pump-overs are fire hose. We macerate for another five to seven days, building mouthfeel. We keep the cap wet and use dry ice to keep the cap fresh.

We press to a tank, settle and then move to barrels where native malolactic usually finishes in two months. We use 100 percent Hungarian oak with 30 percent new and the balance one to three years old. We rack once after malolactic finishes, and we leave the wine in barrel for 28 to 30 months. The wine is not filtered. It is aged in bottle another two years before release.

TASTING NOTES

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SUNSERI: This is a red-fruited wine with red currants, almost pomegranate. There are some dried flower notes and a spiciness from the Hungarian oak. The bottle-aging is starting to show on this wine. The tannins are well integrated, and I think it is ready to drink.

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DUNN: Nice bottle bouquet, which I really enjoy. Classic Petite with some blue fruit but more of sour red fruit. Pomegranate is a perfect descriptor. Good acidity and a good finish. As it opened up, I got that sweet spicy Hungarian oak. Old school enjoyable wine.

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GOETTING: It has bright aromatics of baking spices, wild iris, menthol and rhubarb. It has a bright attack of red currants. It has a big raw oak profile. There is a bit of grapefruit rind and long tannins in the finish.



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REEDY: I get cloves and mint and flint and some vitamin character. The style was refined and restrained. There was some nice fruit with darker tones.

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OLNEY: The nose had a lot of spice to it. Not a lot of fruit there. It is an older wine, so you are getting into more secondary flavors. The tannins were well incorporated. There was some chalkiness, but overall it was velvety and round. I like the texture of the wine, and it had a lot of length.

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PERRILL: Someone paid close attention to making this wine because it is very refined. I got some hard, crunchy candy. It was nice. I would have expected it to be a bit rounder and more supple in its age. It's good wine and tastes fine, but I don't think it's the best representation of Petite from Napa Valley.

Biale Winery

2017 Royal Punishers Petite Sirah

Tres Goetting started working as a cellar rat in 1987 at Tulocay Winery. He majored in agricultural science at California State University, Humboldt, training for a career in forestry, but he realized winemaking was what most interested him. Starting in the cellar, he rose to assistant winemaker at St. Clement Winery in St. Helena. He worked as associate winemaker for Ladera Vineyards from 2004 to 2010. He then went on to become winemaker for Krupp Brothers/Stagecoach Vineyards, Valley of the Moon and the prestigious Post Ranch Inn at Big Sur. He has been winemaker at Biale since 2013.



According to the winemaker:

I am trying to achieve a wine that is dark and ripe and layered with complexity, both aromatically and on the palate. I want extraction, bold fruit and tannin, but I want everything to be balanced. I strive for this wine to have dense weight without any residual sugar, tannins that are fine-grained and long without being hard, alcohol that is not too high and oak that lifts the fruit without over-powering it. I want the wine to be pleasant drinking early but still capable of aging.

The grapes for this wine all come from Napa Valley, and close to 90 percent comes from Carpy Connolly Ranch in Rutherford. This vineyard sits in the skinniest part of the valley, and the soil consists of millennial run-off of soils from the hills on both sides of the valley. It is primarily Rutherford Series gravelly loam, which is deep, well-drained and very fertile. Elevation is 900 feet, and the rows are spaced 4x6 feet. Rootstock is 3309 with Quixote and 420A clones.

The vineyard is irrigated and traditionally farmed. Because the area is pretty hot, we irrigate aggressively with heavy irrigations before flowering and post-veraison. If we see leaf and tendril stress or if the fruit starts dimpling too soon, we irrigate. In effect, we hydrate to maintain balance in the vines. We leaf the morning side of the vines and drop fruit, alternating from one cluster per shoot followed by two clusters per shoot and then back to one in an attempt to leave more room between bunches. The soil is so fertile, we still get 6 tons per acre of high-quality fruit.

We sample and taste to determine when to pick. We like it when the seeds are like Grape Nuts with no flavors. We look for dimpling and for the flesh of the grape to go soft. Grapes are hand-picked into half-ton MacroBins in the morning. We hand-sort on a conveyor belt and then crush and de-stem through a Pellenc to half-ton bins. The rollers are spaced wide, and we look for a Pacman-like split mouth on the berries. We add 30 ppm SO₂, dump the bins into open-top stainless steel tanks and cold-soak for three days at 50° F with one punch-down daily.

After cold soak, we warm the must, allowing a wild yeast ferment to start. At 20° Brix we will inoculate with Clos yeast. It is our hope that the wild yeast will add complexity and the Clos yeast will finish the fermentation. We added no acid to this wine, but we used Go-Ferm at pitch and Fermaid K at one-third depletion. We punch-down one to three times daily during fermentation and delestage by gravity between 12° and 15° Brix to aerate the must, invigorate the yeast and remove as many seeds as possible to help control tannins. Fermentation temperature maxes out at 86° F.

Around 5° Brix, we allow the wine to sit in tanks protected by dry ice until it reaches 0° Brix and then press gently, mixing free run and press fractions. The wine settles for 24 hours and gets racked to barrel. We inoculate for ML as we fill the barrels. When malolactic finishes, we rack from barrel to barrel, cleaning out the lees. We keep free SO₂ at 30 to 35 ppm during aging. Our barrels are 100 percent French with 30 to 35 percent new oak. Wine gets racked every four months. Barrel-aging lasts 17 months. The wine is cross-flow-filtered and aged in bottle for six months before release.

TASTING NOTES



GOETTING: These aromas are dusty currants with some blueberry, quince and purple flowers, like violet. There is a bit of fig and some faint rye bread character. I like the weight and the broad mid-palate structure where the tannins hit the entire palate. The flavor profile is ripe, black fruit, and the oak lifts the fruit without overpowering it. It has medium-grain tannins that have a long lingering finish.

SUNSERI: I get a dry blueberry character, which I really like. Some fresh boysenberry, cocoa and vanilla from the oak. Nice florals of rose petals and violets. The structure is smooth and comes together very well in this wine.

DUNN: I like the dried blueberry character, and that rye bread thing hits me. I found the wine really balanced, especially because this

is from 2017. The oak is not overpowering, but it is well balanced. I'm impressed. It is more balanced than Petite is expected to be, and that is the aim.

OLNEY: The nose is really inviting. Floral, vanilla with a nice fruity expression. For Petite, it still had dark fruit but more in the red fruit spectrum, making it unique in that sense. This is a real success on the palate. The tannin and fruit are seamless. That is difficult with Petite Sirah. There is a purity to this fruit with a lot of length and depth and layers.

PERRILL: Hard to argue with what they have achieved from an aromatic and flavor profile. This is a Napa Valley version of Petite Sirah. There is a doughnut shop, with confectionary aromatics coming from the wood. Delicious aromas. Seamless integration of fruit and tannins. A lot of expertise here. For my palate, it's a little over the top. The nuanced characteristics are sacrificed a bit to the oak impact, but it is hard to argue with a wine that tastes like this.

REEDY: This is great, delicious wine. There are hints of earthy flavors, but there is quite a bit of fruit. It has black cherry, blackberry and a lot of chocolate. The flavors are inviting, and the oak is incorporated super well. The balance was great. The tannins and acid and fruit were seamless. They danced together very well.

Jaffurs Winery

2017 *Petite Sirah* Thompson Vineyard

Stephen Searle was born in Redding, California. He moved to Boston for school where he worked as a waiter while studying music. He fell in love with wine and transferred to the enology program at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. He worked several years in the California wine industry and took wine trips to Europe and the southern hemisphere whenever he could. He started at Jaffurs in 2012 and is currently head winemaker.



According to the winemaker:

Petite Sirah is a bold and brash varietal. We seek to embrace those qualities. We are looking for dark, inky colors and big, ripe aromas and flavors with silky tannins. We try to maintain a balance of power and drinkability. We harvest this grape riper than others because it can carry a higher alcohol while staying in balance. It is also the only wine that sees American oak, which we think lends chocolate notes and mouthfeel. *Petite Sirah* is so concentrated that it absorbs the stamp of extra oak really well.

The Thompson Vineyard is in Aliso Canyon, which is a cool area with humidity and fog. The soil is comprised of Chamise Shale Loam and Sandy Loam. The vineyard sits at 800 feet. Vine spacings are 10x5 feet. We have Carrari clone planted to its own rootstock. The vineyard has irrigation and is traditional/sustainable-farmed. We try not to irrigate post-fruit set, except for heat spikes to maintain the health of the vine. Production averages 2.5 tons per acre.

The vineyard is cordon-pruned with two shoots per spur and two clusters per shoot. We pull leaves on the less exposed side, leaving leaves on the sunnier side. We do this right after the first set, which helps toughen the skins on the berries. We green-harvest at the end of veraison and will drop fruit and wings to maintain airflow and reduce rot.

Our goal in picking is to minimize manipulation in the winery. That said, we realize that *Petite Sirah* can handle extra ripeness. Skins are very bitter early on, so we wait for that bitterness to subside and for the tannins to become less astringent. The seeds never really turn brown, but we will get some shrivel on the skins before we pick. Typically, we come in between 25° and 26° Brix with 3.3 to 3.5 pH and about .5 TA.

Grapes are hand-sorted and de-stemmed, but not crushed. They go to 1.5-ton MacroBins with no SO₂. They get two days in the cold room at 40° F. We allow them to warm for a day before inoculating with either D254 or RC212 yeast. We generally add neither acid nor nutrients. We punch-down twice a day. There is no chilling on the bins, but they are small, so temperatures rarely reach 90° F. Once the wine is dry, we gravity feed free run juice directly to barrels. Press juice goes to a tank and then to barrels all by gravity.

Native malolactic occurs in the barrels. When ML finishes, we add 45 ppm SO₂ and then maintain 25 to 30 ppm until bottling. The wine ages for 10 months in barrels: 70 percent American, 30 percent French and 18 percent of the American are new. There is one mid-term racking in May and then another for bottling. The wine is sterile-filtered and receives one year of bottle age before release.

TASTING NOTES



SEARLE: Opaque inky purple with a dark, wild berry nose, road tar and chocolate. The palate is full and viscous with blackberry compote and Asian spice. The finish is long and supple.

of extraction. Residual sugar helps integrate tannins, making it supple. I'm unsure if I'd have a second glass of this wine.

REEDY: Interesting. Nose like boysenberry jam. Mix of blue fruit and some barnyard notes, earthy tones contrasting against the fruit. Long finish and fruit-centric.

OLNEY: This is more than jammy, and the color is really deep. It was round, super lush with RS that covers up some complexity. It is a super fruit-driven style.

DUNN: Very unique. There is a salinity in the nose. Stewed green bean, strange character. Slightly sweet. Gingerbread and disjointed. It is intriguing and out of the box and not varietal to me.

GOETTING: This is the most interesting wine of the day, but it has pros and cons. Very complex with a lot of layers, some good and some not. You can smell the sugar in it. It is also slightly reduced. It is complex and may be a blend as well. Hard to describe.

SUNSERI: The outlier of the whole day. The sweet aroma almost seems like concentrate. It has a canned fruit character, like Fruit Roll-Ups. Perfumed. A different beast.

Napa

WINERY	Retro Cellars	Robert Biale Vineyards	Aratas Wine
Wine	2013 Howell Mountain Petite Sirah	2017 Royal Punishers Petite Sirah	2012 Petite Sirah
Blend	85% Petite Sirah, 5% Zinfandel, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon	100% Petite Sirah	100% Petite Sirah
Winemaker	Mike Dunn	Tres Goetting	Matt Sunseri
Style Goals	Cold-climate Petite Sirah that is lower in alcohol and higher in acidity with intense fruit character and loads of tannin. Meant to age in cellar.	Achieve a wine that is dark and ripe, layered with complexity aromatically and on the palate. Look for dense weight without residual sugar, fine-grained tannins. A long finish that is not hard and oak that lifts the fruit without taking over.	Our focus is to create wines with a firm mid-palate and muscular structure but with expressive fruit that shows a little restraint. We look for exotic spice from Hungarian oak and long ageability.
AVA	Howell Mountain	Napa Valley	Oak Knoll, Napa
Vineyard		Mostly Carpy Connolly Ranch	Various vineyards
VINEYARD DATA			
Predominant Geology (soil type)	Aiken stony clay	Rutherford series gravelly loam, deep and well drained	Alluvial, well-drained gravelly clay loam
Elevation	1,850 feet	900 feet	575 to 600 feet
Vine Spacing	Old vineyard: 10x12 feet; Replant 5x9 feet	4x6 feet	8x6 feet
Rootstock	Probably St. George	3309	1103 P, B3309
Clones	Unknown; planted in 1980	Quixote and 420A	Clone 3
Irrigation or Dry-farmed	Dry-farmed	Irrigated	Sporadic drip irrigation
Farming (organic, Biodynamic, traditional)	Traditional, but no Roundup	Traditional	Conventional and organic practices
Production	Old vineyard: 1 ton per acre; Replant 3 to 4 tons per acre	6 tons per acre	3.8 tons per acre
When to Pick	Taste, weather conditions, vine condition, tannin development	Combination of visual, sensory and lab analysis	Brix, acid and pH review; Seed browning and canopy evaluation; Evaluate tightness of skins
Vineyard Practices	A lot of thinning but no leaf pulling; Clusters tend to grow into one another and must be separated early	Leaf morning side; Drop fruit to one cluster per shoot alternated with two cluster per shoot pattern; Green drop at 90 percent veraison	Leafing for dappled sunlight and airflow; Fruit thinning twice, some rows three times; Top vines to redirect carbohydrates at veraison
WINEMAKING DATA			
Sort	Thinned on vine, no sorting	Hand-sorted	Hand-sort followed by optical sort
SO₂	50 ppm at crusher, 50 ppm after ML	30 ppm at crusher, 50 ppm post ML; Maintain 30 to 35 ppm free during barrel-aging	40 ppm at crusher
Crush, Destem, Press	Crushed and de-stemmed with E2 and pumped to stainless steel tank	Crush through Pellenc	
Cold Soak	Let sit for one day but no formal cold soak	4 day cold soak at 50° F	5 days on dry ice in 52° F cellar
Yeast	D254	Clos	Native
Nutrients	DAP if YAN levels are low but conservative due to lower Brix	Go Ferm at pitch, Fermaid K at one-third depletion, DAP if needed	1 lb/1,000 gallons DAP and Fermaid at 20° Brix
Acid Addition	Rarely needed; Shooting for 5 to 6 g/L	None	None
Fermentation Temperature	85° F to 90° F	86° F maximum	88° F
Cap Management	Pump-overs with two in-line and flexible impeller pumps; Increase time and frequency as fermentation builds; Only briefly at start and finish	Punch-downs once a day during cold soak; One to three times daily during ferment; One delestage at mid-ferment	One pump-over until ferment begins, two pump-overs to 20° Brix, three pump-overs until 0° Brix; 5 to 7 days maceration for mouthfeel development
Tank Types	Stainless steel	Open top	5-ton open top stainless steel tank and 48S 1.5 ton ferm bins
Barrel Fermentation	None	None	None
Barrels Used	100% new French oak	100% French oak with 35% new	100% Hungarian oak, 30% new; Remainder in 1- to 3-year-old barrels
Malolactic	Start in tank, finish in barrel	In barrel 2 to 4 weeks	Native malolactic in barrel for two months
Racking	Right after ML then every six months	Every four months	Twice during aging
Barrel Aging	31 to 32 months	17 months	30 months
Filtration	Sterile pad	Cross-flow	None
Bottle Age Before Release	2 years	6 months	2 years

Sonoma

WINERY	Foppiano Vineyards	Ridge Vineyards	Truett Hurst Winery
Wine	2016 Gianna's Block Petite Sirah	2017 Lytton Estate Petite Sirah	2016 Estate Petite Sirah
Blend	100% Petite Sirah	94% Petite Sirah, 6% Zinfandel	85% Petite Sirah, 15% Zinfandel
Winemaker	Nova Perrill	John Olney	Ross Reedy
Style Goals	Looking for elegance with plenty of structure and color, but without overwhelming the palate.	Balance in terms of ripeness, acidity, fruit and especially tannin. Showcase intense color, full well-coated tannins and aromatics reminiscent of its Syrah parentage.	Concentration with fruit and tannin in harmony. Blackberry and blueberry with vanilla bouquet. Silky tannins provide long, lush finish.
AVA	Russian River Valley	Dry Creek Valley	Dry Creek Valley
Vineyard	Estate Vineyard, Gianna's Block	Lytton Estate	Estate
VINEYARD DATA			
Predominant Geology (soil type)	Pleasanton loam	Clay loam and gravelly clay loam	Clay loam and volcanic
Elevation	117 feet	225 to 275 feet	Valley floor
Vine Spacing	7x11 feet	8x6 feet	8x6 feet
Rootstock	St. George	110R, 1103P, St. George	101-14
Clones	Foppiano selection	Predominantly FPS 03 with some 04 and 05	Unknown
Irrigation or Dry-farmed	Irrigated in severe heat only	Drip irrigation	Irrigation
Farming (organic, Biodynamic, traditional)	Traditional with little synthetic material	85% certified organic; 15% in transition to organic	Certified Biodynamic
Production	2.2 tons per acre	2 to 4 tons per acre	2.5 to 3 tons per acre
When to Pick	Minimum of 24.5° Brix to assure mature tannin; Signs of shrivel key; History and experience with vineyard	Watch for color change of leaves, crop load and weather; Look for sweetness in grapes with no green flavors; Typical 23.5° to 24° Brix with 3.45 to 3.55 pH	Based on flavor, physiological status of grape and vine, chemistry and weather; Look for tannins to move from green to round; Multiple picks
Vineyard Practices	Leaf thinning, de-clump and drop clusters to prevent rot, otherwise hands off; Hand-harvested	Head-trained, spur-pruned; No trellis, some interior leafing; Thinning as needed; Deep, infrequent irrigation as needed	Certified Biodynamic requires boots on the ground; A lot of thinning, often one bud pruning in pursuit of concentration
WINEMAKING DATA			
Sort	Vineyard sort	Field sort	Sorted
SO₂	50 ppm at crusher then 30 to 35 ppm during aging	30 ppm at crush, 25 ppm post ML then none unless specific need calls for an add	35 ppm at crush
Crush, Destem, Press	De-stem only, no crushing; Whole cluster is a good option with clean fruit	De-stem, no crush, whole berry fermentation	De-stemmed and crushed
Cold Soak	None	24 to 36 hours	6 days at 53° F
Yeast	Premier Cuvée	Indigenous	RP15
Nutrients	Complex nutrient in equal proportion to DAP; Usually one dose, two if aromatics are unappealing	None	Microessential at 22° and 19° Brix
Acid Addition	Rarely needed; Used only to adjust pH over 3.8	0.5 to 1.0 g/L when necessary	2g/L at crusher, fine-tune prior to bottling
Fermentation Temperature	Between 75° F and 90° F, depending on my mood; seen little difference in outcome	80° F to 84° F	Maximum at 86° F
Cap Management	Pump-over twice daily then once a day after 5° Brix; Press at 0° Brix; Free run and press blended together; Press to one bar	Pump-over twice daily until 12° to 15° Brix then one pump-over daily	Both punch-downs and pump-overs depending on fermentor
Tank Types	5-ton open top	5- to 7-ton SS open top with submerged cap or standard stainless steel fermentors	Stainless tank and T-bins
Barrel Fermentation	None	None	None
Barrels Used	100% once-used French oak, which gives less tannin and same oak impact as 50% new	100% American oak, 15% to 20% new	100% French oak; 30% new for 9 months; 50% new for 5 months
Malolactic	Native ML in tank and barrel	Mostly in tank, about 20% in barrel	In barrel for 1.5 months
Racking	Only if wine gets reductive or needs oak impact adjustment; Top monthly	Once every 3 months after ML	At 9 months in barrel
Barrel Aging	24 to 28 months	14 months	14 months
Filtration	Pad filter to sterile membrane	Pad-filtered at bottling	Cross-flow-filtered
Bottle Age Before Release		One year	18 months

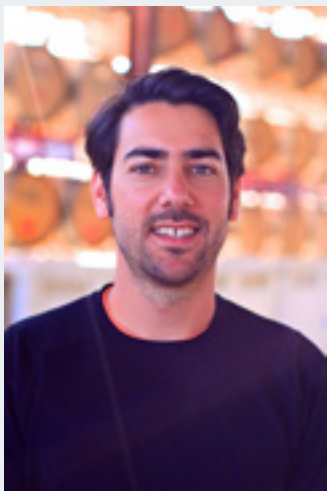
Central Coast

WINERY	Aaron Wines	Sculpterra Winery	Jaffurs Winery
Wine	2016 Petite Sirah	2015 Estate Petite Sirah	2017 Petite Sirah Thompson Vineyard
Blend	86% Petite Sirah, 14% Syrah	100% Petite Sirah	100% Petite Sirah
Winemaker	Aaron Jackson	Paul Frankel	Stephen Searle
Style Goals	Looking for the right combination of varietal fruit, savory notes and bright acidity to create a rich, powerful wine with polished tannins and a great mid-palate.	We are after a big and bold style highlighted by floral aspects, lavender from our vineyard and a heavy American oak presence. The wine is ripe, with high alcohol, plenty of tannin and a long finish.	We want to make a powerful wine that exhibits a silky nature to the tannins, allowing us to balance power and drinkability.
AVA	Paso Robles	Paso Robles, Geneseo District	Santa Barbara County
Vineyard	Various vineyards	Frankel Family Estate Lago de los Patos Block	Thompson Vineyard
VINEYARD DATA			
Predominant Geology (soil type)	Limestone and shale/clay loam	Calcareous soil, clay loam, small stone gravel	Chamise shaley loam and sandy loam
Elevation	850 to 1,750 feet	600 feet	800 feet
Vine Spacing	Varies	5x10 feet	10x5 feet
Rootstock	Various	101, 10R	Own-rooted
Clones	Clone 3	Durif # 3	Carrari
Irrigation or Dry-farmed	Irrigated and dry-farmed	Drip irrigation	Irrigated
Farming (organic, Biodynamic, traditional)	Organic and traditional	Traditional	Traditional/sustainable
Production	2 to 3.5 tons per acre	3 tons per acre	2 tons per acre
When to Pick	Look for tannins to polymerize and soften on the vine; Get pH balanced between 3.4 and 3.7; Avoid prune flavors	Health of vine; Brix, pH acid, brown seeds taste and tannin, crunch of seeds	Combo of numbers, flavor and physiological indicators; Seeds never really turn brown; Skins are very bitter early on; See tannins soften before picking
Vineyard Practices	Pull leaves inside canopy, drop clusters and remove all shoulders	Two buds per spur, leaf-pull, shoot-thinned, fruit-thinned; VSP with cross-arms on both sides of canopy	Crop at 2 clusters per shoot; Pull leaves on exposed side after set; Green harvest at end of veraison
WINEMAKING DATA			
Sort	Cluster sort	Sort	Hand-sorted
SO₂	40 ppm at crush	None at crusher, 35 ppm post ML	None at crusher; 45 ppm post ML; Maintain 25 to 30 ppm free at bottling
Crush, Destem, Press	De-stem with no crushing then to shaker, triage table to remove raisins and shot berries	De-stem only; Whole berry fermentation	De-stem, no crushing
Cold Soak	4 to 8 days	2 days at 55° F	2 days at 40°
Yeast	Mostly native; D80 and D254 on some lots	RP 15	D254, RC212
Nutrients	None	Superfood three times during fermentation; 1 lb with yeast hulls	None
Acid Addition	Almost none; Maybe 0.5 g/L on some lots	1 g/L tartaric at crushing	None
Fermentation Temperature	75° F to 88° F	Start 55° F, up to maximum 85° F	Up to 90° F
Cap Management	Anaerobic pump-overs daily during cold soak followed by daily delestage/aerative pump-overs until cap rises; Then twice daily punch-downs until dryness and return to one punch-down daily	Punch-down only twice daily	Punch-down twice daily
Tank Types	48S bins	New American puncheons and bins	1.5 ton macrobins
Barrel Fermentation	None	None	None
Barrels Used	100% French oak, 55% new	100% American oak, 78% new	70% French, 30% American; 18% new American
Malolactic	Native in barrel	ML inoculated in tank and then racked to barrel to finish	Natural in barrel about 6 months
Racking	Once for blending, once for bottling	Once post-malolactic, then to bottle	Once mid-term in May, again at bottling in August
Barrel Aging	22 months	22 months	10 months
Filtration	None	Rough filtration only plate and frame	Sterile
Bottle Age Before Release	6 months	One year	One year

Sculpterra Winery

2015 Estate *Petite Sirah*

Paul Frankel grew up on his family's 265-acre ranch in Paso Robles. When he was seven years old, his family planted 135 acres of winegrapes on the property. Paul loved the whole idea of growing winegrapes, so he went to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo to study wine and viticulture, thinking he would be a grape grower. That all changed in 2008 when he made his first lot of wine. He was hooked and now is in charge of producing 12,000 cases a year for Sculpterra Winery.



RANDY COONS

According to the winemaker:

We like our *Petite Sirah* to be big and bold. We want big flavors with plenty of floral aspects highlighted by the lavender character that comes from our vineyard. We used 78 percent new American oak (heavy toast) to bolster the flavors and highlight the tannins. We pick ripe because that's when the flavors are best, so we tend towards high alcohol with a long finish.

The vineyard is comprised of calcareous soil, mostly clay loam and small stoned gravel. We are 600 feet above sea level. Our rows are planted 5x10 feet. We used Durif 3 clone, and it is planted on 101-110R. We are traditionally farmed and use drip irrigation. This block is in one of the coolest sections of our vineyard, so counter-intuitively, we prune early in late December or early January. This gives us early bud break, and the shoots push early, so by the time we get a possible frost the damage will not be as severe. This early pruning also helps early flowering, set and harvest at full Brix.

We have cross-arms on both sides of the canopy, which maximize light and airflow through the vines. We leave two buds per spur, shoot-thin, pull leaves and drop fruit. We make sure the bunches do not touch, and we cut off shoulders and wings. We don't need to sort grapes, either in field or at the winery. We average 3 tons per acre.

To pick we look at the health of the vine, checking Brix, pH and TA. Ripe fruit is what we are after because it tastes best with dark fruit character and floral accents, so 26° Brix is a minimum. We look for browning of the seeds, taste of the fruit and tannic crunch of the skins. TA is usually between .45 and .55 with pH around 3.8. Because we harvest early, rain rarely enters the picture.

Grapes are harvested very early in the morning, starting around 3:00 a.m. They get to the winery cold where they are de-stemmed but not crushed. One-third of the grapes go directly into new 500-liter American oak puncheons whose heads have been removed. The balance goes to bins. We cold-soak for two days before inoculating with yeast. I use BDX yeast for the wine fermenting in puncheons and RP-15 or ICV-D254 in the bins. They will all get pressed together, which I believe adds some subtle complexity.

We punch-down twice a day; sometimes we'll add a third mid-day punch-down at peak fermentation. Temperatures max out at 88° F. All the *Petite Sirah* gets pressed together in our old

basket press. We do not separate free run from press juice. The wine goes to tank where it settles for two to three days. We inoculate for malolactic and then clean rack back to the puncheons and American oak barrels, 78 percent new. We rack once after malolactic completes and add 35 ppm SO₂. We age in barrel for 22 months, topping every six weeks. The wine gets a polish filtration in our plate and frame and then gets at least one year of bottle-aging before release.

TASTING NOTES

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FRANKEL: Inky purple dominated by blackberry, black currant and plum aromas with lavender notes. There are also dark aromas of smoke and a note of coffee-caramel

candy from the oak. The tannic core takes a back seat to flavors of raspberry, licorice, orange zest and more lavender. The tannins are strong and pleasantly coat the gums through the dark chocolate finish.

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OLNEY: I got a lot of spice and cocoa. The oak is present, well done but definitely up front. The palate was fruit-driven, quite soft and full on entry. There were some nice chalky tannins carrying through on the finish and giving it a lot of length.

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PERRILL: The presence of the oak is clear but not unrealistic. Aromatically, you get coconut and cocoa, but right behind it is nice fruit character that leads into the palate where you get

a heavy dose of the oak that is again followed by the fruit. Texturally, you get appropriate *Petite Sirah* tannins, which is nice, but it is definitely oak-driven.

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REEDY: The oak was big. For me it was barbecue. It was big wine and had big fruit.

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GOETTING: Very Cabernet-like. Bold and luscious with a beautiful entry. It has a root beer character. I thought maybe American oak with a bit of that dill character.

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SUNSERI: The oak is a bit heavy-handed and masks some of the aromas. There is some sage, a raw wood character. Underneath is some Cab character, cocoa, coffee and earthy. It is weighty with a nice finish but a little heavy-handed on the oak.

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DUNN: I knew it was American oak and got a coconut-type character. The oak is aggressive on the palate with dry tannins. It was less ripe than expected from the aromatics. It softens in the glass. This wine needs more time. I would back way off on the oak.



Aaron Wines

2016 *Petite Sirah*

Born and raised on the Central Coast near Paso Robles, Aaron Jackson fell in love with winemaking at an early age. By age 16 he worked alongside winemakers in their vineyards and at their wineries. He graduated the wine and viticulture program at Cal Poly and went on to earn his MS from the University of Adelaide. He released his first wine in 2002 but continued working for other wineries, like Four Vines and Saxum, until 2012 when he was able to concentrate on his own Aaron Wines' brand, which focuses on the Petite Sirah varietal.



According to the winemaker:

I want this Petite Sirah to be powerful, rich and highly extracted, but also balanced. I look for ripe fruit with savory notes, spice and balanced acidity. My goal is to make a “complete” wine, one that is true to the varietal yet has polished mouthfeel, a round mid-palate and a soft tannic finish that provides structure.

This wine comes from a group of selected vineyards. Elevations range from 850 to 1,750 feet. Soils tend toward limestone and shale loam on the hillsides with more clay loam at the lower elevations. We think all the vineyards are Clone 3, but they are planted on a variety of rootstocks. We have both organic and traditional vineyards, and some require irrigation while others are dry-farmed. The sites differ one from another, which add complexity to the final blend.

We prune aggressively and shoot-thin, pulling laterals if there is excessive vigor. However, none of the sites are high vigor, so canopies are generally small to moderate, requiring minimal leaf-pulling, usually from inside the canopy only. We drop clusters based on shoot length and remove shoulders. We want the fruit clusters to hang free, not touching but with adequate leaf cover. Our yields average 2 to 3.5 tons per acre.

We pick primarily on taste. We want the tannins to polymerize and soften on the vine, shifting from hard green flavors to more gentle astringency. Many of our vineyards produce low pH fruit due to the limestone soils, so we often find ourselves waiting for that pH to rise, sometimes taking the fruit to higher Brix than would be considered ideal. Petite Sirah can be very sensitive to high temperatures and is quick to raisin; so when heat waves are predicted close to harvest, we try to pick, before they arrive, to avoid damaged fruit with prune flavors in the winery.

Grapes are picked either at night or early in the morning depending on the vineyard, as some sites are too steep to pick safely in the dark. Everything is cluster-sorted on the tractor at harvest. Once at the winery, the clusters get sorted again on a table, then de-stemmed with no crushing to a shaker/triage table to remove raisins and shot berries. We add 40 ppm SO₂. Grapes are packed with dry ice to get them down to 48° F and moved to the barrel room for cold soak. We perform an anaerobic pump-over daily during cold soak.

Typically, native fermentation begins after four to six days. In general, we add no acid or nutrients. We do once daily delestage pump-overs until the cap rises. Then we punch down twice daily until dryness. Fermentation temperature stays on the cooler end, between 75° F to 85° F. Once the wine

reaches dryness, we heat the must to 88° F to 90° F for three to four days to allow the tannins to soften and polymerize. The wine is pressed in a bladder press up to 1.2 bar, and we rack both free run and press juice to a tank where it settles overnight.

The wine goes to 100 percent French oak with 55 percent new. We use only 300-liter hogsheads and 400-liter puncheons. Native malolactic occurs in barrel. The wine ages in barrels for 22 months with one racking to blend and a second for bottling. We try to keep our winemaking as reductive as possible. All rackings are done under gas to minimize oxygenation and to keep the fruit fresh. We have already worked in the vineyard and during winemaking to soften the tannins, so aeration is not needed to balance astringency. The wine is bottled unfiltered and gets six months' bottle-aging before release.

TASTING NOTES



JACKSON: Deep and very dense, it opens with pure, ripe blueberry and blackberry notes, along with licorice, mocha and shades of pepper. The palate echoes the strong core of fruit, along with caramel, toasty oak, licorice and spice. Surprisingly bright for such a rich wine, the finish is both powerful and fresh, with tremendous length.

SUNSERI: Really big fruit expression of blackberry, boysenberry and a cocoa I like. A sweet entry that is seamless and mouth-filling. It is very big wine and a bit hot on the finish.

DUNN: Ripe and sweet, but balanced with gingerbread, boysenberry and cocoa. There is some fig character. It is on the ripe spectrum without being cloying. It has good balance.

GOETTING: A pleasurable wine. Easy to drink. Big fruit nose that pops out of the glass. I get some Graham cracker. Soft entry. Nice, mid-palate with well-balanced tannins. A big rich style but still has good structure.

REEDY: Interesting wine but I liked it. Refined. Contrast of both dark and bright flavors, which play off each other very well and lend complexity. Chewy, big tannins with acidity on the finish that pushes through and finishes the wine very well.

OLNEY: The nose is ripe, jammy and pure blackberry with some mint. Everything in the wine, the fruit and tannins, are well balanced in the sense that there was the right amount of each thing, but there was a lot of it. It is a well-made big viscous wine.

PERRILL: I would be proud of this wine. It expresses the region. It is full bore extraction and color. It seems to have just the right amount of oak to balance it. The winemaker was very aware of what he was working with and allowing it to express itself. Big wine with black, purple fruit but well balanced. Nice structure all the way through. My favorite of the flight.

Varietal Focus: *Petite Sirah*

Petite Sirah may not have the delicate complexity of Pinot Noir nor does it have the stately elegance of fine Cabernet Sauvignon, but more like a lovable, unruly child doing his best to please, *Petite Sirah* has a charm all its own. All the winemakers that participated in this varietal focus agreed: the primary challenge with *Petite Sirah* is working with the massive tannins. They do what they can in the vineyard, often letting sugars climb a bit while they wait for bitter tannins in the skins to soften.

In the winery, they handle the fruit with care, mostly de-stemming but not crushing the berries. Fermentations are not allowed to get too hot, and they don't go overboard with punch-downs or pump-overs, trying to mitigate tannin extraction. Light pressing or splitting press fractions from free run is common. Most of our winemakers feel that the massive tannic backbone of *Petite Sirah* allows it to handle a lot of oak, even American or Hungarian, without the wood overpowering the fruit character.

The wines in this tasting represented a wide range of styles. The Foppiano and Ridge examples were close to elegant while Aaron, Biale and Truett Hurst were dense, mouth-filling lush wines. Sculpterra and Aratas were the most oak-influenced but in very different ways, and the Jaffurs and Retro wines stood out in unique ways from the others.

However they were made and regardless of where they came from, all the wines had inky color, big, bold flavors and full-bodied mouthfeel with a tannic bite on the finish. *Petite Sirah* is not a subtle wine, no matter how gentle the winemaker's hand. The consumer must root around in the wine to discover the charms of aroma and flavor that hide under the sheer boldness of it. Decanting *Petite Sirah* seems to help, releasing aromas of blackberry and blueberry and spice, along with violet and lavender. Those dark fruit aromas continue in the flavors with lovely floral notes and usually some chocolate or coffee from the oak. Once you find them, those notes are present with every sniff and every sip.

As Aaron Jackson points out, there is no international benchmark for *Petite Sirah*. We are not trying to emulate another region or duplicate the traditions of another place. Since California has close to 85 percent of the world's *Petite Sirah*, quite likely, the international benchmark for the wine will happen here. Winemakers are working on it now. This writer is looking forward to regularly tasting their progress. **WBM**



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