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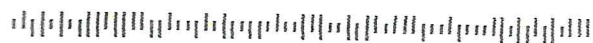
the
WINE &
CULTURE
ISSUE

**CHRISTIE
BRINKLEY**
DISHES ON HER
PROSECCO
PROJECT

**JOHN
MALKOVICH** IN
THE VINEYARD

**FERGIE'S HAPPY
HOUR PLAYLIST**

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Petite **Sirah's** *Grand* **Arrival**

BY JIM GORDON

PHOTOS BY JESSICA CHOU

Five California
winemakers
coax ever-better
varietal wines
from the
never-shy grape.

Petite Sirah is the black sheep of California wines that never broke out into mass popularity on its own. Simultaneously, it's well loved by winemakers and beef eaters for its awesomely dark color, its plump blueberry and dark chocolate flavors, and its notoriously thick texture.

Botanist François Durif created the grape in France during the late 19th century with seeds from Peloursin and pollen from an unknown source. It became known as Durif in his honor. California growers began planting it in the 1880s and used the name Petite Sirah to refer to Durif and other dark-skinned grape varieties including Syrah and Zinfandel. The diminutive was not far off the mark, as it turned out. DNA fingerprinting at the University of California, Davis, during the 1990s confirmed that Durif had been derived from Peloursin pollinated by Syrah.

California winemakers have long respected the grape as a blending partner with Zinfandel—where it provides a framework of firm, dense tannins to support the Zin's rich fruit notes—as well as other red varieties. While not at all a petite wine, Petite Sirah isn't always a tannic monster, either.

The five winemakers featured here have proven this point in recent vintages with rich but comfortably polished wines.



Theodora Lee

Theopolis Vineyards

Lee didn't plan to have a wine label. The hard-driving trial lawyer, who was living in San Francisco, simply wanted to find a quiet weekend retreat in Northern California wine country.

But a great vineyard site for Petite Sirah and a rainy vintage transformed her into "Theopatra, Queen of the Vineyards," and the owner of Theopolis wines. Both names stem from her college sorority sobriquet of Theopolis, and they capture her colorful, expansive personality.

A Texan who learned to drive a tractor at age eight on her grandfather's farm, she bought a rolling property in the Yorkville Highlands of Mendocino County and established a five-acre vineyard in 2003. Though originally split between Petite Sirah and Zinfandel, it's now virtually all Petite Sirah.

Initially, she sold all her grapes to producers like Carlisle and Halcón Vineyards for use in their well-reviewed Petite Sirahs. But during the wet 2012 harvest, her major buyer refused the fruit, claiming it hadn't reached the contracted ripeness level. Rather than letting the grapes rot, Lee found winemakers to custom crush.

Two years later, the wine was bottled and adorned with her own label, which has an ancient Egyptian motif. Most recently, her 2017 vintage goes beyond Petite Sirah's typical blueberry and chocolate tones into savory, singed-rosemary aromas and complex peppery flavors.

While she's still not a hands-on winemaker, Lee's the sole salesperson. She lugs three suitcases on law firm-related business trips. The first is full of clothes, and the other two are packed with bottles to pour at wine dinners.

"It's been wonderful," she says. "I couldn't ask for a better complementary lifestyle. Obviously, I don't make my living making wine, but it is one of the most rewarding experiences of my life."

Martha Barra

Barra of Mendocino

Petite Sirah flourished in Mendocino long before the Barras began to grow it, but what this Italian-American family is able to capture in its wines is a near-perfect match between grape and terroir.

"Mendocino does Petite Sirah really well, and I really believe our Petite Sirah is our best wine," says Martha Barra.


As the owner, manager and approver of final blends for the label, Barra continues the work begun by her late husband, Charlie Barra. In 1955, he bought 175 acres of grapes, which has since expanded to more than 300 acres.

For their first vintage as a winery in 1997, Mendocino pioneer John Parducci made the wines. Barra recalls his advice.

"He talked about mouthfeel and balance, how it comes down to those two things," she says. "No one likes to taste or drink a Petite Sirah that sets your teeth on edge. That's where the barrel aging in 30% new French oak comes in, and not releasing the wine before its time."

The Barra of Mendocino Petite Sirah earned high scores for its 2016 and 2017 vintages with deep, dark fruit flavors and creamy texture. Barra credits the Bella Collina Vineyard, perched 1,000 feet above the Ukiah Valley floor with a south-to-southwest exposure. It stays warm enough in the cold winters for orange trees to share the site.

Staff tastings identify the Bella Collina lots as the best Petite Sirah from their properties, says Barra. It's separated out to make a few hundred precious cases of the estate-grown varietal wine. The vineyard has been certified as organic for almost 20 years. It's irrigated lightly and able to provide good ripeness without extreme alcohol. The family also grows Petite Sirah in other sites, but Winemaker Randy Meyer uses those lots to blend in with Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon.

A portrait of Martha Barra, an older woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark jacket over a patterned scarf. She is holding a glass of red wine up to the light, looking at it with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

"Mendocino does Petite Sirah really well, and I really believe our Petite Sirah is our best wine."

A man with a beard and a grey beanie, wearing a blue button-down shirt, is holding a glass of red wine. He is smiling and looking towards the left. The background is a solid dark green color.

Jorden Mingle

Miraflores Winery

In an informal tasting of aged Petite Sirahs from the Sierra Foothills, the Miraflores 2010 stands with the best. It's complex, dense with fruit and complete in composition.

"That 2010 is so lively," says Mingle, production manager for Miraflores. "It's a fun one for us in the winery to see how it develops. I love drinking our Petite anywhere from four years on. I like a little freshness still in the fruit, and to see the tannins coming along nicely. The 2010 is hitting a real nice sweet spot now."

In 1998, the Miraflores property was purchased by Victor Alvarez, a Colombian physician. Foreseeing a few acres of vines and a small cellar, he officially founded the winery in 2003. Today, there are around 45 estate acres and an elegant tasting room.

"This is a great place to be making wine," says Mingle. "The keys are well-drained granitic soil, our estate vineyard's elevation above 2,450 feet [and the] cool nights and hot days. The Foothills have quality fruit and quality people."

Mingle grew up in the Sierra Foothills, his mother with Spanish and Mexican roots and father who was raised in Germany. He attended University of California, Santa Barbara, then headed back to the hills.

He joined Miraflores in 2017 after eight years of experience at Lava Cap Winery, where he trained under winemakers Tom Jones (now Iron Hub) and Joe Norman (previously Heitz Wine Cellars), and now continues to learn from veteran Marco Capelli, who is a consulting winemaker for the estate.

Mingle was pleased to see how that 2010 Miraflores bottling compared to wines from more experienced winemakers in El Dorado County, like a beefy, fresh-textured 1997 from Greg Boeger and a spicy, youthful 2002 from Jonathan Lachs at Cedarville. If this is the direction that his current release, a 2016 estate wine, is heading, then it's going the right way.

"I love drinking our Petite anywhere from four years on. I like a little freshness still in the fruit, and to see the tannins coming along nicely."

Joseph Smith

Klinker Brick Winery

It's not uncommon for a California winemaker to hail from France or Australia. But Klinker Brick Winery in Lodi found someone from Belize.

Smith, who makes smoky, opulent Petite Sirah and a handful of other wines for the brand, moved to California in the late 1990s and worked in construction. By chance, he found a job with Gnekow Family Wines that eventually led to wine-making there.

"Before I went there, I had never had a glass of wine in my life, so it was quite a journey for me," he says.

The Felten family, owners of Klinker Brick, hired Smith in 2008 after he had worked stints with Hahn Family Wines and Michael David Winery. Now, Smith owns or partners in other brands that he makes, like Concrete Wine Company and a wine distribution business in Belize.

Smith had blended some Petite Sirah into Klinker Brick's Syrah, but he wanted to see what else it could do. He was focused on Antoinette Celle Vineyard, a small plot with rocky, clay soil, rather than the usual sand, to form the core of a varietal wine.

"I said to Steve Felten, 'Let's make that vineyard as a Petite Sirah, not a blender. It can make one that we can actually pair with food and can be drunk by itself,'" says Smith.

It took some work to bring the struggling, dry-farmed vines back into shape. Soon, however, the well-balanced Celle fruit accounted for 75% of the Petite Sirah, bolstered by 25% of riper grapes from Jessie's Grove vineyards.

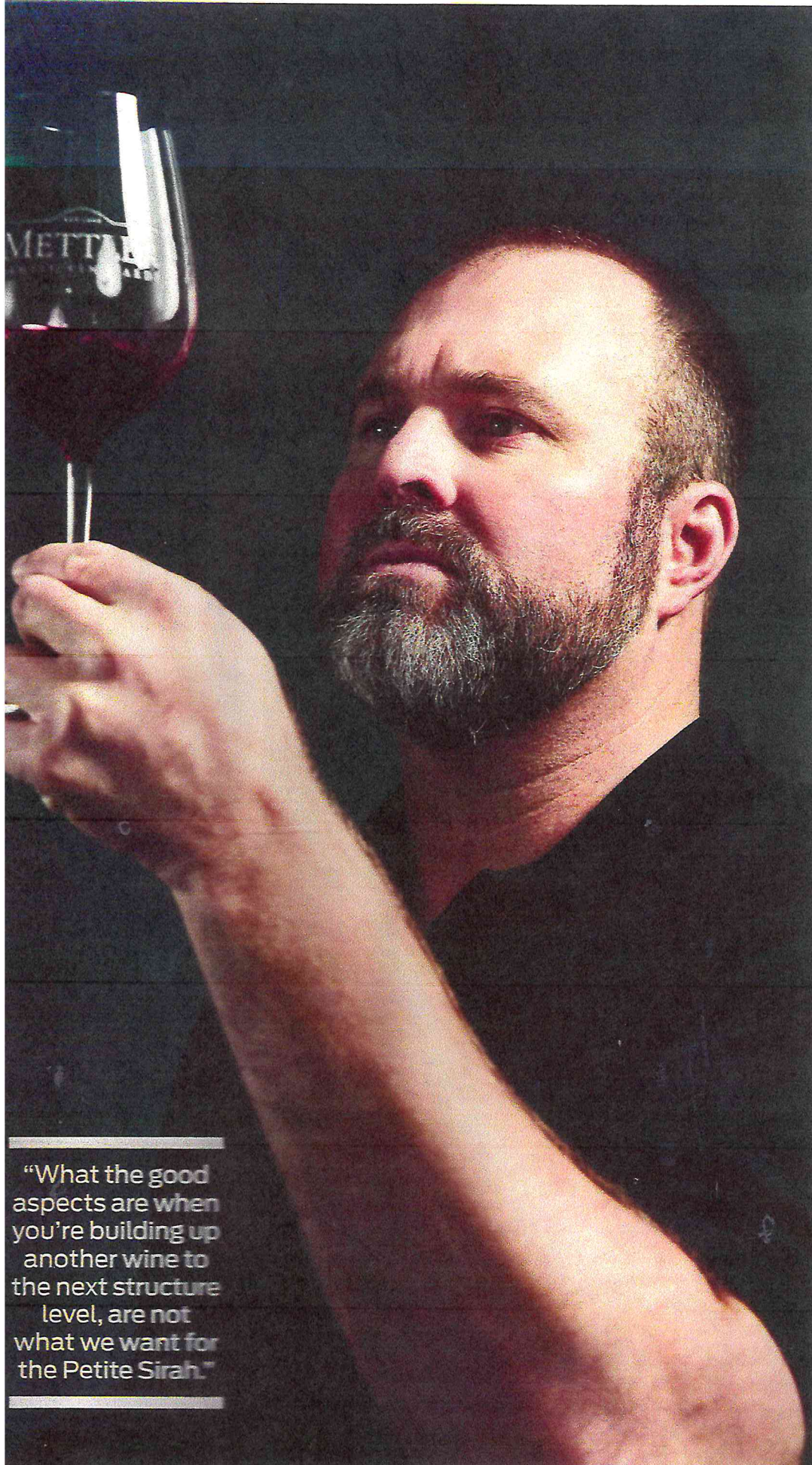
The current 2016 vintage is hardly shy. It's jammed with black pepper and blackberry and is big in structure.

Smith loves the reactions it gets in Klinker Brick's tasting room.

"Guys would come in and you would see the expression on their faces," he says. "They'd be surprised that it wasn't as bold and as bad as people made it sound. They'd say, 'Honey, try this. You're going to like it.'"

"Let's make that vineyard as a Petite Sirah, not a blender. It can make one that we can actually pair with food and can be drunk by itself."





"What the good aspects are when you're building up another wine to the next structure level, are not what we want for the Petite Sirah."

Adam Mettler

Michael David Winery and Mettler Family Vineyards

Adam Mettler makes outstanding Petite Sirahs for three brands based in Lodi: Petite Petit and Earthquake for Michael David Winery, where he's director of winemaking, and Mettler Family Vineyards, where he's co-owner and winemaker.

The cartoony, technicolor Petite Petit label blends some Petit Verdot into the Petite Sirah. It makes a huge visual contrast with the quiet, traditional Mettler Family bottle, but the winemaking approach is pretty similar, says Mettler.

The fifth-generation Lodi grape grower harvests ripe grapes that often yield wines at least 15% alcohol by volume (abv). He does a warm fermentation with lots of pumpovers for maximum color and tannin extraction, then ages the wines in French oak barrels, 30–40% of them new, for 14–18 months.

While Zinfandel likes American oak, Mettler says Petite Sirah is a better match with more subtly spicy French barrels. The effect is evident in the Mettler Family 2017 Petite, which fills out its firmly tannic frame with the French oak spice cabinet and plump blackberries.

Winemakers have long blended dark, densely tannic Petite into Zinfandel. Mettler, honored as *Wine Enthusiast's* Winemaker of the Year in 2018, is one of them.

"But what the good aspects are when you're building up another wine to the next structure level, are not what we want for the Petite Sirah program," he says. He looks for grapes that give a somewhat softer, juicier, fruitier flavor.

"Personally, I like the variety a lot, the bigness, the plushness," he says.

Customer reactions to the wine are strong, too. "It's always intriguing to people. They see that dark color, they taste it and people tend to like everything about it. The reason it's doing so well for us is because people go back and get it."