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All in the Family?

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Dear Wine Club Members,

Our winter wine club shipment may smack somewhat of nepotism, but we thought it might be fun to focus on some closely related wine varieties...and possibly clear up some common misconceptions!

On our Estate Vineyard, we grow three “family members” of grapes associated with France’s Rhône region: Syrah, Shiraz and Petite Sirah. Just how closely are these grapes connected? Are they the same or not? How can we tell them apart by tasting them? Sit tight...here comes a crash course.

2009 Syrah, Estate

Harvest Brix: 24.9 pH: 3.60 TA: 6.4 Alc: 14.5% ML: 0% RS: 0.0%
Cases produced: 70 Barrel age: 3 years, mostly neutral European oak

This small, thick-skinned, dark red grape grown in the Rhône Valley is currently found in many parts of the world. It can be grown in both moderate and warm climates, and its flavor profile is influenced by climate and soil composition. Generally, though, it is characterized by lush, blackberry fruit and medium to heavy tannins that can hint at cocoa and spice. It can be produced as both a pure varietal and as a blending wine.

The Sierra Foothills, particularly in higher elevations such as Fair Play, have proven to be exceptional for growing bold, fruit-forward yet balanced Syrah. Our own vineyard yields a tiny Syrah harvest with very low pounds per acre—and some of the best quality we have found. This is an extremely limited, “wine club only” wine. The rich, concentrated blackberry fruit and bold tannins are balanced with cleansing acidity, resulting in a classically structured food wine. Enjoy this one with wild game, flavorful red meats and grilled veggies, particularly eggplant. It shines with Mediterranean dishes. Though we deemed the 2009 vintage ready for release, it will continue to improve for many years.

2009 Shiraz, Estate

Harvest Brix: 25.6 pH: 3.70 TA: 6.2 Alc: 14.7% ML: 0% RS: 0.0%
Cases produced: 97 Barrel age: 3 years, mostly neutral European oak

Okay, so what’s the deal with Syrah and Shiraz? Many people in the industry actually consider these to be the same grape, and granted, they are very close genetically. We personally consider them to be close siblings...maybe twins separated at birth.

Most California winemakers will tell you that the only difference is the name (Syrah in France, Argentina, Chile, and most of the United States; Shiraz in South Africa, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand). Some may make a stylistic differentiation based solely on winemaking (Syrah for Old World style wines; Shiraz for New World style wines). Our view is that although originally the same grape, almost 200 years of propagating in Australian soils have imparted on Shiraz enough unique characteristics to differentiate it from its French counterpart.

We have polled many of you after Syrah-Shiraz taste tests in years past, and the consensus has been that there are distinct differences between the Syrah and Shiraz grown in our Estate Vineyard and made in our classic style. Whereas the Syrah is characterized by blackberry fruit and chocolatey tannins, the Shiraz shows blueberry fruit and peppery spice, with somewhat smoother tannins. They also pair with food differently; the Shiraz pairs exceptionally with lamb, and with Middle Eastern or Indian food.

A little history...

The Shiraz grape is thought to be named after the city of Shiraz in Iran, near where the process of wine making possibly originated 7000 years ago. It is believed that the grape was brought into southern France by a returning crusader, Guy De'Sterimberg. He became a hermit and developed a vineyard on a steep hill where he lived in the Rhône River Valley. It became known as the Hermitage. The Shiraz grape was introduced into Australia in 1832 by James Busby, an immigrant who brought vine clippings from Europe with him. The Australians have been developing Shiraz as their foremost wine grape for two centuries.

Syrah first appeared as a wine grape in California in the 1970s, and several clones of the grape have spread widely through the state. Around the same time, an Australian Shiraz clone was also introduced. It is available in several “heat treatments” (resulting from tests for resistance to pests and disease at UC Davis), but these are generally believed to be strains of the same clone.

In 2003, Cantiga Wineworks planted two French Syrah clones and two Australian-clone heat treatment selections in our Estate vineyard—one in the form of cuttings taken from the original planting of Shiraz in California. The purpose was to make a study of the clonal differences of these grapes when cultivated in the same soil and with the same farming techniques. In conclusion, yes there are distinct differences, but we love them both! Our Syrah, unfortunately, is suffering from the “syrah decline” that is decimating vineyards in our region; but so far, the shiraz vines appear resistant.

2010 Petite Sirah, Estate

Harvest Brix: 25.9 pH: 3.70 TA: 5.7 Alc: 15.1% ML: 0% RS: 0.0%
Cases produced: 168 Barrel age: 3 years, mostly neutral European oak

Petite Sirah, although similar to Syrah and Shiraz in some ways, is indisputably a separate variety. Also originating in the Rhône Valley, where it is known as Durif, this grape is more like a “country cousin” to the other two grapes. It is characterized by deep inky color, bold tannins and dark blackberry fruit. It is sort of like a big, overbearing Syrah—with plenty of attitude but somewhat lacking in subtlety and elegance. A respected winegrower friend of ours refers fondly to Petite Sirah as “a good peasant wine.”

Petite Sirah is grown most abundantly in California, although it can also be found in Australia (under the name Durif). Here in California, it is often blended with Zinfandel. In some regions, including ours, it does make an excellent pure varietal wine. When made in our classic style with good acidity and balance, it does make for an enjoyable food wine—but it will overwhelm subtle dishes. We recommend it with venison and other flavorful meats; it is also really enjoyable with Italian cuisine. In fact, we happily pair it with many of the same dishes we enjoy with Zinfandel!

And now, we hope you enjoy these three wines and have fun picking out similarities and differences for yourselves. Enjoy them with food and feel at liberty to draw your own conclusions about their family ties! We would love to hear your feedback.

Sincerely,

Rich & Christine Rorden

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