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## OUT-OF-CHARACTER WINE? THAT'S FINE – IF DELISH!

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Last year, Zinfandel was close to becoming our state grape. Lucky for me, it didn't. I'm not a Zinfandel girl. I like to keep jammy fruit, the wine's zingular characteristic, on my English muffins.

But I love Cline's Big Break Zinfandel, with its subtle mid-palate peppermint. And I'll willingly drink almost any Lodi Zinfandel. The soil in Lodi has tons of clay and loam, which often yields peppery and vegetal notes over marmalade.

But, what's the point? If a wine is not true to varietal – if the way it's made doesn't fully express the grape's fated flavors – is it a good wine?

It's a tough question. I've had Cabernet Sauvignon that tastes like Port and unoaked Chardonnay that tastes like Sauvignon Blanc. They were fine wines, but were they truthful?

While I'm a firm believer in drinking what you like and not overthinking the label, I do think it's an engaging topic, and one I faced at a recent Petite Sirah tasting.

I was at Villa Taverna with the venerable Vintners Club of Tiburon. We tasted 10 Petite Sirahs blind, and with the exception of one 2003, they were all from the 2004 and 2005 vintages. They all retailed for less than \$55 and hailed from California, with one Aussie exception.

In its truest form, Petite Sirah is a dark, tannic, teeth-staining, buzz-inducing, brawny wine. It's so inky, inmates could write home with it. It does best in warm, dry climates, such as Lodi or Calistoga, because tight clusters make it prone to rot and mildew. Like Zinfandel, it can be very ripe, with high levels of alcohol and residual sugar.

With such a flavor profile, it's natural for your palate to get a bit pooped in an extensive tasting. Not the case with softer wines. I once judged 40 Pinot Noirs in an afternoon and still swigged a full glass with grilled salmon that night. It was the one thing that chatty Pinot panel agreed on – how the tongue never tires of the grape.

The great thing about tasting with the Vintners Club, however, is that you sniff, sample and rate your numbered wines in silence. Once everyone submits their ballots, discussions among the seasoned wine drinkers begin. And they are fascinating. One man's spiked Cherry Coke is another man's balanced, Old World star.

There was actually one of those, and here's my point: A light-bodied, ruby-colored, easily quaffable wine passing as Petite Sirah? Where's the beef? Or in this case, isopropyl? We agreed that more than half of the wines suffered from Petite heat, a sensation in the mouth akin to rubbing alcohol in the nostrils.

But they were true to varietal in other, more pleasing ways, too: mocha, black cherries, plums and dense blackberry fruit were right where they should be. Take Concannon's 2004 Heritage. I found it to be the most sophisticated expression of the Big P.S. It was brawny, yes, but the tannins were sleek and the finish smoky, both promises of an elegant wine in years to come.

In 1961, Concannon Vineyard became the first winery to release varietally labeled Petite Sirah, so they've figured out what works. Their newest Petite Sirah vines on Tesla Road in Livermore run north-south, instead of their prior east-west orientation, to promote even sun exposure and proper ripening. They also position their shoots vertically to provide a canopy of shade and

promote good air movement through those taut clusters. Airflow from the Bay cools the vines at night and protects them from overheating. Finally, they don't make the wine every year. Only years when the fruit is optimal.

Still, three wines on the table had very little in common with the Concannon or the other super siblings. And here's why: The small berries in those tight clusters mean more concentrated fruit, so it's up to the winemaker to either massage or wrestle those mighty tannins. Just depends on what they're going for, I guess.

While I continue to wonder where the lighter-style wines belong in a discussion and ranking of Petite Sirahs, I admit they were lovely: less viscous and lower in alcohol, with hints of dried flowers. Two of them finished in the top five, which shows where my colleagues sit on the true-to-varietal debate. They probably don't care.

Bursting with strawberries, raspberries and other jammy fruits, they tasted to me like Zinfandels. And they were a welcome relief.