

Paste

52 Wines in 52 Weeks: Petite Sirah and Lagrein (Blueberry Pie in a Bottle)

By Amy Glynn



A recent conversation about pairing wines with pies (it's the logical follow-on to Halloween candy pairings, and yes, that comes up every year) got me thinking. The truth is, I personally wouldn't pair wine with pie; pie is clearly a coffee situation. But if you want to play the pairing game and you like a challenge, sure. Entry-level: everything goes with champagne. Beyond that, apple pie is easy; lots of dry whites have apple notes (pinot blanc almost always does, chardonnay frequently does if it's not over-tropicalized, and Roussanne has a nice blend of orchard fruit notes). Pumpkin pie is unctuous and spicy and might like to hang out with something a little sweet, maybe even a raisiny late-harvest red and almost certainly a ripe Chenin Blanc. Pecan people should probably give up and go with bourbon, but something dry and low tannin is the best bet (dolcetto would work).

Then a friend caught me bragging about my pie-crafting chops and demanded a demonstration, only she wanted blueberry. I said blueberries were not a fall fruit. She said we live in California where everything is an all-year fruit. I said only a transplant from the Midwest would say that. If you're wondering if this

argument is about to get interesting, the answer's "no," but I did start thinking about the wine equivalents of blueberry pie. Which is not to say I will be making one for my friend unless she wants to wait until May because I am not backing down on that.

In tasting notes, references to very sweet things like pie or candy can program people to expect sugary wine, and that's usually not the deal, so if you are allergic to residual sugar don't be put off by dessert terminology. A dry wine can easily express crème brulee (chardonnay), cherry pie (syrah), passionfruit syrup (New Zealand Pinot grigio) or Cherry Coke (California Pinot Noir). So, when I say "blueberry pie" I am not saying "sugar bomb." I am saying if you like dense blue-fruit notes in a wine seek out the out-of-fashion Rhone also-ran Petite Sirah (or Durif) and the northeastern Italian oddball Lagrein (now being made quite well in Oregon).

Lagrein is a very old varietal native to (and largely confined to) Northeastern Italy. Petite Sirah is a Rhone Valley grape most commonly found in California these days. These grapes are not close kin as far as I am aware, but they share a wintry stick-to-your-ribs quality, a dense texture, heavy body, assertive tannin structure and a flavor profile that favors dried or stewed blueberries, figs, plums or prunes, and brooding peppery spice. Both are inky, deep purple wines (I think only Tannat and Sagrantino can touch these guys on the color saturation front, so if you are someone who drinks red wine for the anti-oxidants, this is your grape). They share a profound and substantial mid-palate; Lagrein tends to have a longer finish than Petite Sirah. Lagrein is more acidic than Petite Sirah (in fact in Central CA they are sometimes blended to average that out). They are rich, satisfying wines that feel good in cold weather the way Provencal rosé feels good in hot weather. And because they are not trendy, they are usually great values (the occasional exalted exceptions are mostly worth it for a once in a while splurge, they're really, really good). Good Petite Sirah is largely going to come from Northern California, especially warm zones like Napa (expensive) and Lodi (poets can afford it). Lagrein will almost always come from Alto Adige-Trentino on the Italy-Austria border; it is also seen in New Zealand and increasingly in Oregon.

Petite Sirah



Cast Petite Sirah Grey Palm Estate (Dry Creek Valley, CA \$50)

Purple. Earthy, intense nose with notes ranging from anise and chocolate to leather and grilled meat. Palate favors blueberry, blackberry, cherry, vanilla, earth, a trace of menthol. This wine is happy when it gets some air time before drinking. Tannins are intense... honestly the whole wine is intense and if you don't dig that you probably want to find a different one. If you love serious, serious full-bodied reds, though, this is a treat. Dark, brooding, slightly melancholy; this is a wine for channeling your inner Romantic poet... although your inner office job guy will need to pay for it. Definitely an experience as much as a beverage.

Gustafson Vineyards East Ridge Petite Sirah (Dry Creek Valley, CA \$25)

The operative word is “concentrated.” California winemaking has tended to favor a “maximalist” approach of high extraction, edge-pushing ripeness and obsessive oaking with many varietals that arguably do better with less. The thing about Petite Sirah is that it’s a “lean in” kind of grape that way; its best expressions are a bit over the top and you don’t have to be *Vino-Voldemort* to get them into that zone. Case in point. Gustafson is a voluptuous, Rubenesque but well-proportioned wine with decadent, layered fruitiness balanced with “big-boned” structure and firm acidity. Dense aromatics favoring dark wild berries and milk chocolate, inky stewed-berry palate with traces of lavender and pepper. Structure for miles.

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