

Bringing it On Home to Concannon Vineyard: A Petite Sirah Symposium

by Harry Stoll

Concannon Vineyard was the first American winery to commercially label Petite Sirah. That was the 1961 vintage, bottled in 1964, when Jim Concannon was the winemaker. He celebrated his 82nd birthday on July 25, St. James Day. His grandfather, James Concannon, founded the winery in 1883. Jim Concannon for years represented Concannon wines, traveling the country, visiting events from sophisticated celebrations to wine tasting at grocery stores.

It was fitting for Petite Sirah advocates, “PS, I Love You,” to hold their 11th annual Petite Sirah Symposium on July 23 at Concannon Vineyard. Jo and Jose Diaz, of Diaz Communications, organized the symposium, including attracting well known industry members as speakers at the seminars. They are tireless advocates of the lush and complex Petite Sirah. Jo Diaz is thankful to Concannon for hosting the event.

John Concannon, Jim’s son, has assumed his father’s duties representing Concannon. Not far from the verdant beautiful grounds of Concannon, in the conference room of The Wine Group (owners of the Concannon label) John

welcomed participants and told how Concannon crafted the 1961 vintage of Petite Sirah. Members of the press were present along with about 60 wineries, including three from Livermore Valley. Over half the Livermore Valley wineries produce Petite Sirah.

Occasio Winery owner and winemaker John Kinney said it was good to have media and winemakers in the same room. He also said he wished the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association would pay more attention to the event and in the future more Livermore Valley wineries would participate. At the event Occasio poured its 2010 Petite Sirah from Livermore Valley’s Del Arroyo Vineyard that retails for \$35. It’s a classic Petite Sirah, with plenty of hit but controlled tannins, and lush flavors of blackberry, huckleberry. Boysenberry, ripe red raspberry, and dark chocolate. Perfect New York steak wine.

Nottingham Cellars owner Jeff Cranor attended with his son Collin, who is the winemaker. Jeff said the symposium presented much good information.

Collin was proud of his 2012 Petite Sirah and filled a bottle from the barrel and poured it at the event along with his 2011 Petite Sirah.

The promising 2012 from Livermore Valley may be even better than the 2011, which whispers of freshly baked cinnamon bread, and blue and blackberry compote. Cherries and raspberries rush into the palate followed by cinnamon, clove and dark chocolate. This bold boy wants braised ribs. The winery suggests you also try it with dark chocolate covered strawberries for dessert. It retails for \$38.

And, of course, Concannon was one of the wineries pouring in the cool barrel room that contains vertical tanks of a mellow yellow color made by French craftsmen a half century before. Jim said, “They are filled with Petite Sirah.” One Petite Sirah Concannon was pouring was the 2009 Captain Joe’s Petite Sirah Livermore Valley that retails for \$36. It honors the founder’s son, Joe Concannon, who served as a captain in the First Cavalry. This Petite Sirah comes from the four estate vineyards. It dispatches messages of nutmeg and clove. It is soft and creamy with flavors of blueberry pie and blackberry with a silky long smoky finish.

Wineries from all over the state were pouring their Petite Sirahs. All featured the muscular Petite Sirah structure and the typical

flavors, but each one was a nice variation of the theme.

The symposium concentrated on marketing. After all, no matter how good your wine, if you can’t sell it, you’re toast. The keynote speaker was Steve Heimhoff, author, and wine critic of *Wine Enthusiast* magazine, who is enthusiastic about Petite Sirah. He said, “. . . Petite Sirah has had its ups and downs, in terms of the public’s perception of it.” He said one nationally syndicated wine critic wrote, “Petite Sirah is the Rodney Dangerfield.” Heimhoff exhorted the participants not to demand respect, as that would be negative, but said, “Let us tell the world, in simple, honest terms, that Petite Sirah is great wine. Let us repeat that message over and over and over, until it sinks in. That is how to convince the world of the truth of a message.”

What followed were sessions on Petite Sirah. Dave Pramuk, of Robert Brialey discussed about 129 years of growing Petite Sirah in California—1884 to 2013. Mike Drash of Aratas Wines and Ann Kraemer of Shake Ridge Vineyard discussed growing Petite Sirah in the historical Sierra and marketing in a modern world. Aaron Jackson of Aaron Wines discussed crafting an

intriguing marketing message, as well as great Petite Sirah.

The sessions ended with the founders of Barefoot Cellars, Bonnie Harvey and Michael Houlihan, talking about creating the message of respect. Each participant was given a copy of their newly published book (with Rick Kushman) *The Barefoot Spirit*, an inspiring tale of persistence, ingenuity, much hard work, and some luck—not all of it good—that is the story of Barefoot Cellars rise from pretty much nothing to a leading national brand in 20 years.

After the sessions, the two founders, and other participants, and members of the press, ate lunch under a long wide arbor completely covered with grape vines, with low-hanging clusters of grapes ready for the harvest and crush. The arbor is at one end of the expanse of lawn with trees along one edge, roses along the road, and topiaries, all flawlessly maintained and evocative of an earlier time, maybe 1964, when Concannon, on these premises, bottled and labeled the first Petite Sirah in America.

Diners sat six to a table, with silken tongued Irishmen, Jim Concannon and Michael Houlihan, at the same table, with talk rang-

ing from how their forebears arrived here from Ireland late in the 19th Century to the making and marketing of wine. Houlihan offered several aphorisms, such as, “Do what you’re good at, but know what you’re not good at and hire somebody good to do that.” He wore out a lot of shoes promoting the Barefoot brand. He said he learned “Wine marketing 101” from grumpy Don Brown, wine buyer for the Lucky supermarket chain (Barefoot had a hard time placing wine there.) Brown said make the label in English, with no fancy curlicues, so it can be read from four feet away, and make the name the same as the logo. That last led Bonnie and Michael to adopt Barefoot as both the logo and the brand. Much of what they talked about is in their excellent book.

During the lunch, not far from the house where he was born, Jim Concannon raved about John Concannon’s daughter, 16-year-old Shannon Concannon. “A straight-A student,” said Grandpa, “who finished physics as a sophomore.” He said she would someday replace her father as the face of Concannon.

For more on the symposium, see Section II, page 10.