

Napa Wine Made From Old Vine Petite Sirah, The Grape That Once Dominated Napa Valley

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Contributor

A storyteller who focuses on wine and the people who make it.

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Bush-trained vines during the fog in the Palisades Vineyard

JIMMY HAYES, JBH PHOTOGRAPHY

Ten years. Ten years to get a vine just right, according to the heritage way of growing premium wine grapes.

First, the rootstock goes into the soil. Two years later, the vine is grafted onto the rootstock. Six years of getting advice from four well-known viticulturists, one of them a PhD who is a leader in her field of research, with the most experienced vineyard workers meticulously pruning and shaping these bush vines (also called goblet vines because they should be shaped like a goblet cup). Then, after the shape of these bush vines resembles some of the grand old goblet vines of the world, it takes two more years to bring it to an ideal balance of fruit-producing potential through future management in the vineyards.

“In another 30 to 40 years, people will come to the valley and have no idea what old vineyards look like,” explained [Palisades Canyon](#) co-owner Steve Rasmussen.



Felicia Woytak
JIMMY HAYES, JBH PHOTOGRAPHY

Steve is speaking about the old heritage bush vines that his area of [Napa Valley](#) is known for, currently the steward to some of the most precious Petite Sirah old bush vines that top Napa producers have cherished for years. As the old vines around his valley start to get past their prime where they can no longer produce, forcing owners to pull them out, they will be replaced by trellised vines that are more in line with modern practices that help mechanize a lot of the work in the vineyards. But he and his wife, Felicia Woytak, bought their Palisades Canyon property with the primary focus on preserving the

heritage style of growing grapes and conserving their 796-acre property as a whole. So, when it came to the vineyards on the property, they would protect those precious, old

heritage bush vines but also go through the decade long process of replanting in the heritage style, which would need many years of detailed work to get the 796-acre property to the perfect place, creating an ideal growing zone for the fruit before they could even get the vines where they wanted them for making ultra-premium wine.



Old Petite Sirah vine

JIMMY HAYES, JBH PHOTOGRAPHY

Steve fully admits that it has been Felicia leading the charge when it comes to taking on the massive challenge of making sure to not only restore the vineyards to what they looked like over 100 years ago, but also, to insist that the new bush vines are not only for show, as she would go to any length to make sure these new heritage vines lived up to their much older siblings. Today their estate, Palisades Vineyard, is only 17 acres, as they would like to keep it small to continue their meticulous work and to carry on the organic management of the whole vineyard.

Palisades Canyon



Palisades Canyon estate

JIMMY HAYES, JBH PHOTOGRAPHY

It has been a long journey for Felicia to find the ideal property, which would incorporate her love for nature, being an adventurous camper and whitewater rafter for decades, her dedication to protecting wildlife and its habitat, her and her husband's devotion to education and her deep passion for wine. She already had a highly accomplished career in male-dominated industries when she started in the 1990s, navigating herself through Silicon Valley and then making a mark for herself by having her own successful brokerage for commercial real estate. Despite her husband Steve having a very successful career as a mathematics publisher, he makes no bones that Felicia's incredible financial success makes purchasing Palisades Canyon possible and why they can go to great lengths to keep heritage viticulture alive.



Sheep in the vineyards

JIMMY HAYES, JBH PHOTOGRAPHY

Steve and Felicia moved out to Berkeley in the ‘80s and have been part of the wine community ever since. Noting how well they know Napa, as well as Felicia being well-versed in how the real estate market works with every self-proclaimed “dream” property hardly ever living up to its proclamation, one can imagine that it is saying something that when Felicia first visited the Palisades Canyon property, in [Calistoga](#), she was so overwhelmed with the powerful feelings of falling in love with the property that tears started to stream down her face. And they do not take for granted for one moment how lucky they are to have such a place, as they allow educational programs to give kids first-hand experiences with geology, watershed study, regenerative farming practices and allow them to hike their 15-mile hiking path and meet their goats and llama. They especially like to invite lower-income kids and their families to come and enjoy their beautiful property.

Among all these great achievements and incredible projects that give back to the community, they have some of the most sought-after Petite Sirah grapes—despite once

being the most planted grape in Napa Valley, Cabernet Sauvignon eventually prevailed with its association with Bordeaux fine wines in France. Hence, Cabernet Sauvignon is king in Napa today, with very few growers making premium Petite Sirah.

Petite Sirah is not a variant of the Syrah grape; it has been identified through DNA testing as the Durif grape variety found in Southern France. It has small berries and makes wine with lots of structure and deep concentration. The best are multifaceted, extremely complex wines.

A Rare Breed



Steve Rasmussen, Felicia Woytak and Graeme MacDonald in the vineyards

JIMMY HAYES, JBH PHOTOGRAPHY

One day, they were introduced to winemaker Graeme MacDonald, who was fascinated by the history of the property which was first planted with vines in the 1870s, thrilled to look at the head-trained, dry-farmed old Petite Sirah vines and to see their “ghost” winery,

which is a rare sight, as these wineries were built from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, during the winemaking boom, so very few still exist.

Graeme MacDonald knows about outstanding, historic vineyards as he is a fourth-generation Napa Valley grape grower and winemaker whose grandparents sold grapes from their property, which became part of the legendary Robert Mondavi To-Kalon Vineyard bottling. After spending some time with Felicia and Steve, all three decided that they would collaborate to make Palisades Canyon wines, creating a small amount of the estate Petite Sirah as well as estate Cabernet Sauvignon (blended with a bit of estate Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot) and the lesser-known white, estate Chenin Blanc, which are all bush-trained under strict heritage guidelines.



Palisades Canyon's property with vines near a creek
JIMMY HAYES, JBH PHOTOGRAPHY

Felicia admires the top Chenin Blanc ultra-premium wines from South Africa. She feels that the grapes do well in their valley with a good amount of heat, and the bush-trained

vines help to keep an ideal balance of retaining plenty of that crisp freshness that Chenin Blanc is known for.

Considering its lack of prestige combined with the difficulty of growing an ideally ripened Petite Sirah grape, one would have thought that the grape would have vanished entirely from Napa Valley, where Cabernet Sauvignon and other grapes are more of a guarantee and do not need to be babied in the vineyards like Petite Sirah. But it still stands in the magnificent Palisades Vineyard. The same can be said about a woman fighting to carve her path in commercial real estate in one of the most competitive markets in the U.S. when male-owned and run businesses had no interest in hiring a woman for anything other than an administrative assistant. By all accounts, she should have crawled in a hole and just disappeared, yet instead, she was able to get female bankers to give her loans so she could buy those properties herself, work for herself and succeed all by herself.

Some rare breeds are hard to wipe out as they find a way to survive, as important people realize their potential, that they are something special, and ultimately become victorious.



2021 Palisades Canyon, Petite Sirah
CATHRINE TODD



2021 Palisades Canyon, Chenin Blanc
CATHRINE TODD

2021 Palisades Canyon, Chenin Blanc, Calistoga, Napa Valley: 100% Chenin Blanc from organically-farmed Palisades Vineyard. A serious white wine

that shows all the uniquely fine qualities of Chenin with an extremely complex bouquet of honeysuckle, dried hay and intense minerality with deliciously rich flavors of apple strudel and quince paste balanced by mouthwatering acidity. A real stunner!



2021 Palisades Canyon, Cabernet Sauvignon
CATHRINE TODD

2021 Palisades Canyon, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley: 95.2% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4.6%

Cabernet Franc and 0.2% Petit Verdot from organically-farmed Palisades Vineyard. Beautiful nose with lovely violet aromas with blueberry scones and an intriguing underlying note of graphite that has sculpted tannins that are finely pixelated with classic Cab flavors such as tobacco and blackcurrant with a distinctive sense of place with a persistent finish that has lots of finesse.

2021 Palisades Canyon, Petite Sirah, Calistoga, Napa Valley: 100% Petite Sirah from organically-farmed Palisades Vineyard. A profoundly seductive nose that is dark and brooding with blackberry liqueur, licorice and asphalt with a delectably dense palate filled with wild cherry cordial and subtle nuances of baking spices and black tea that has an impressive texture that is round and plush yet delicately etched to give shape and drive to the finish.



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I write about wine as well as the passion-fueled journeys of the people who make it and the fascinating cultures and places where wine is made. I am the founder and sole contributor of the wine blog Dame Wine which has been nominated for various awards: Louis Roederer International Wine Writers' Awards, Wine Blog Awards and Born Digital Wine Awards. Also, I was named one of the Top 15 Most Influential Wine Bloggers by USA Wine Ratings and one of the Top 10 Wine Influencers on Twitter by Global Data. Before pursuing writing full time, I spent many years selling various wines from around the world in the Manhattan (New York City) market starting in 2003, such as entry level large brands, small artisanal producers and ultra-premium fine wines – which gives an interesting perspective to my writing. I have taken a wide range of professional wine courses, but the culmination of my wine education was earning the Diploma from the Wine & Spirit Education Trust in 2010.