

Tasting Rosé Wines

By Bill Shepard

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Forget the Revolutionary crowds, Madame Defarge and her knitting needles, tumbril carts and the Scarlet Pimpernel! We spent last Bastille Day in a much calmer mode tasting *rosé* wines at a festival organized by GiraMondo Wine adventures in Washington. The only cloud on the horizon had been an ill considered decision from EEC authorities at Brussels to authorize the making of an ersatz *rosé* wine by mixing white and red wines, but by the time of our tasting, cooler heads had prevailed, and the danger had passed.

The format was well thought through, and conducive to a relaxed evening. The wine tasting was held at Whitmore House, near Dupont Circle in

Washington, and the numbers were perfect - enough people to create a sense of participation and excitement, but not so many that it felt crowded. We were more like guests at the class and tasting which followed. And there was good variety, in the seven French *rosé* and 8 wines from around the world, complemented by light appetizers. Only the light *rosé* wines from the Anjou region of France were underrepresented, perhaps because our host hails from Provence.

The informal class which opened the evening is something of a GiraMondo tradition. One learns without much stress. A fine host, Laurent Guinand downplayed his own expertise and gave us a few points to serve as a reference framework for appreciating the wines. It was interesting to hear his observation that “*rosé* wine is all that is selling these days.”

Whether that is part of the general resistance to wine prices that we have recently seen, or a testimony to the fact that these are pleasant, warm weather wines, was not clear. But for years, *rosé* wines were not taken seriously, and seemed something of an afterthought. Now, they are beginning to be sought out by knowledgeable consumers, at least during the hot summer months. I have the impression that French wine producers, noticing this trend, are seeking to expand their market share accordingly.

Guinand said that there are two ways of making *rosé* wine. The first is simply to leave the colorless juice of grapes in contact with their skins long enough for the *rosé* color to emerge, but not, of course, so long that you have made red wine. The second method is the *saignée*, or “bleeding.” With that method, some of the grape juice is removed during the fermentation of a red wine, in order to make what remains more robust. What was drawn off used to be discarded. Now it is increasingly sought as a product in itself, as *rosé* wine.

Guinand was ably helped by Anna Tyack, of Vignobles & Signatures, who introduced two *Côtes de Provence* wines which I thought were the stars of the tasting. The 2008 Domaine Saint André 2008 *Vieilles Vignes Rosé* AOC *Côtes de Provence* (retail \$20-\$23), produced from vines 25 years old, was light and peppery, but had nice structure. From the same producer and AOC, the 2008 *Confidentielle Rosé* (retail \$35-\$40) had more body, and was quite distinguished, and of limited production. Made from 40 year old vines, it had lots of minerality (from the schist laden subsoil, it was said). It was suggested that the wine be served with smoked salmon, or possibly, stir fried vegetables, or lamb kebobs. This wine

would add a touch of distinction to your hot light summer company meals. Each was made from 50% old vine Mouvèdre, 25% Cinsault, and 25% Grenache grapes.

The region of Provence, whose “wine business” was begun by the Romans, remains a leader in the production of *rosé* wines. Starting in the 1950s, areas of this region east of Marseilles were subdivided by *terroir*, and *Côtes de Provence*, *Côteaux d’Aix en Provence*, and *Rosé de Provence* emerged. Within these regions one finds Tavel, still perhaps the most famous *rosé* region as well as the largest, where only this wine is produced. The wine is said to be a mineral styled *Côte du Rhône*. We then have Bandol, close to the sea between Marseille and Toulon, Provence, and Les Baux de Provence, said to produce a somewhat deeper wine, owing to the iron subsoil, reflected in the red soil (like Tara).

A helpful chart grouped these wines with food types. For example, very light food (most salads) would pair well with *rosé* wines from the Loire Valley (Anjou), or Côteaux d’Aix en Provence. Light food (grilled white meats, quiche) might go with Côtes de Provence, but look to Baux de Provence for heavier meats, and Bandol or Tavel for game. (While helpful, I think this goes a bit far. You probably wouldn’t be serving game at all in the summer. If you did, perhaps look to these *rosé* wines to set the stage with your appetizers, then serve an appropriate red wine with the game). All *rosés*, it was rightly noted, would go well with barbeque - and I think that this is what many Americans have discovered, with great pleasure.

And so, many attending the tasting were interested in finding “their” *rosé* to go with outdoor barbeques - not a bad way to spend an evening. And if not one made it to the heights of Sasha Lichine’s pricey Château d’Esclans, thought to set the standard for quality French *rosé* wines, that is hardly a criticism.

Both the seven French and eight world wines were served in order, light to heavy. The 2007 Comaine Roland Tissier & Fils, an AOC Sancerre, was flavorful and rather fizzy, with red berry notes. I wondered why it was so light, since it was made from 100% Pinot Noir, a distinctly *unlight* grape variety. The 2007 Château la Mothe du Barry, said to be AOC Bordeaux Clairet, was nice, fresh and rather mineraly, with raspberry notes. I don’t know about that stated AOC. The British term “claret” for Bordeaux wine refers to the earlier school of Bordeaux winemaking, when a lighter red wine was produced. It had nothing to do with *rosé* wines.

We then moved into tasting the *rosé* wines of Provence. The 2008 Domaine de la Figulere Cuvée Magalle, an AOC Côtes de Provence, made of 50% Mouvèdre, 25% Cinsault and 25% Grenache, was very nice, a good weight. I liked the 2008 Les Vignerons de Tavel Carte d’Or, with strawberry flavors, a wine produced from Grenache, Cinsault and Syrah grapes, that was “together” and satisfying. The next wine, a 2007 Domaines Bunan Mas de la Rouvière, an AOC Bandol, resembled it, and was also of medium weight. But I preferred the 2007 Château La Calisse, with raspberry notes, which was made at AOC Côteaux Varois en Provence of Syrah and Grenache grapes. Another taster preferred the final and deepest French wine, the 2008 Mas de Cadenet, a blend from Grenache, Cinsault and Syrah grapes, which I had dismissed as “nice plonk,” as having “Finally, some body!”

The eight wines from other nations were a mixed bag, and I will mention those four wines that pleased. The lightest, a 2008 Tegernseerhof Zweigelt *Rosé* from the Wachau District of Austria (retail \$15) was quite nice, light with cherry notes. We also liked the 2008 Cantina Gabriele Rosata from Lazio, Italy, which was rather sweeter, with apricot flavors. The two best were from the United States, and they were the deepest. My friend and I both specially noted the 2007 Albemarle *Rosé* from Albemarle, Virginia, which had very pleasant honey notes. Serve this wine with Greek pastries such as *baklava* as a dessert wine. The deepest, a 2007 Big House Pink from Monterey County, California, was very satisfying, and with notes of candied fruit, also a good dessert wine.

We left this pleasant evening with a few new favorites, some increased knowledge about these wines, and the conviction that they are beginning to come into their own. Try them yourself. You may discover some new favorite wines that are comparatively inexpensive, summertime treats.