Grown-up pinks

4 May 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

See our tasting notes on almost 90 of the more interesting pink wines currently available.

Looking at the (relatively short) list of my current favourite still pink wines I am rather surprised to find that there are as many Italian wines on it, five, as there are wines from Provence, the traditional heartland of French rosé. I had thought that fine Provençal rosé was my favourite style: palest pink, bone dry, silky smooth, scented by garrigue and enlivened by the imagined sound of cicadas.

But too many of the Provençal pinks I have tasted recently have been closer to what I would call the supermarket pink model, a bit sticky and sickly, with only the monotone smell of low-temperature fermentation and suspiciously unintegrated acidity on the finish to keep them fresh - or just too watery to be interesting. The result of high yields or very early picking, presumably.

Ever since tasting their 2006s, I have admired the ground-breaking wines of Sacha Lichine's **Château d'Esclans** in the hills of Provence, which seem to have lifted the game for all. Quality continues to be exemplary, as you can see from my tasting notes. The better rosé of the (Daylesford/JCB) Bamfords' property near Hyères, **Le Secret de Château Léoube**, is another very sophisticated example and rather less expensive than anything in the Esclans range other than their most basic Whispering Angel bottling (which continues to become more sophisticated with each vintage).

But this year I have lost my heart to another Provençal rosé, albeit not from classic pink wine country but from the greater southern Rhône Valley. **Chêne Bleu 2010 Vin de Pays du Vaucluse** is grown within sight of the spectacular Dentelles de Montmirail, which engrave the skyline above the village of Gigondas, on the property developed with great care by Nicole Rolet, whose husband Xavier is chief executive of the London stock exchange. (Deep pockets seem to be a requirement for both production and consumption of fine Provençal rosé.)

I can also recommend various current pink wines from other French regions. Most pink Sancerre that comes my way seems hideously overpriced and deficient in character but I really liked **Vincent Delaporte 2011 Sancerre Rosé**. 'Positively screams Pinot Noir', I'd say, to borrow a commonly heard phrase from my Master of Wine blind wine tastings of the mid 1980s. With its strong perfume, white-Sancerre-like acidity and bone-dry finish, it seems to me better suited to food than to aperitif drinking and I could imagine it going particularly well with poached salmon.

In Pinot Noir's homeland of Burgundy, compelling rosés are thin on the ground, and usually rather thin on the palate too - but Bruno Clair's pink Marsannay is a perennial exception and **Dom Bruno Clair 2009 Marsannay** manages to be a fruity, dry and well-preserved exception - perhaps because of the intensity of the 2009 vintage in Burgundy.

Two out of the three non-European rosés to have taken my fancy recently are inspired by Pinot Noir's delicacy and a relatively cool climate. Parts of the Yarra Valley outside Melbourne can be really quite fresh, and Phil Sexton of Giant Steps and the irresistibly named Innocent Bystander has been ahead of the game at coaxing fashionable wine styles out of the vineyards there. **Innocent Bystander, Rosé Pinot Noir 2011 Victoria** (fruit sourced from Goulburn and Port Philip in the challenging 2011 vintage) is chock full of slightly smoky Pinot character but with no excess sweetness or alcohol. Like many of these rosés, it's just 12.5%.

The other New World pink Pinot tastes as though it was grown somewhere even cooler, in one of Chile's newer, Pacific-cooled coastal wine regions. **Viña Leyda, Loica Vineyard Rosé Pinot Noir 2011 Leyda Valley** shows more of the rose-petal character of relatively simple Pinot Noir, but also suggests it may last rather longer than most of the typically ephemeral rosés. This wine seems to get better with every vintage.

But my third preferred non-European pink is quite different from any of the relatively delicate wines described above. Co-op stores in the UK have been selling it, as well as the much more youthful and so far less satisfying 2011, at £7.50 but although it has been hanging around on my tasting table all this time, **Fairview, La Capra Pinotage 2010 Paarl** is very far from dead. With its Victorian fairground label and big, brash fruit fashioned by South Africa's trademark red wine grape, it shouts 'I'm different'. Like many pink (and white) wines at lower prices, it is kept fresh by a certain amount of dissolved carbon dioxide - but in this wine there is just so much fruit to counterbalance it that this ploy seems sensible

rather than tricksy. Bring on the braai - and note that the 2011 needs a bit longer in bottle.

Surely the most unusual rosé is that highlighted in Luis' article on offbeat Spanish bits and pieces published on Tuesday, **López Heredia, Viña Tondonia Gran Reserva 2000 Rioja**. It may be ridiculously underpriced in Spain but by the time it gets to export markets such as the UK it is £20.75. The best value pink wine I have found so far among 2011s is not on a supermarket shelf but on the list of The Wine Society, the only Spaniard in my collection of favourites, from Spain's rosado heartland and made from the archetypal rosé grape Grenache or Garnacha. **Vicente Malumbres, Rosado 2011 Navarra** is just £5.95 and is so big that it needs to be kept in check by being served relatively cool. Subtle it ain't but it is well balanced and the acidity tastes genuinely fresh rather than like an ugly sticking plaster.

But, as I say, the real surprise to me has been how many and varied are the interesting Italian rosatos now being made. I used to think of Spain as much more useful hunting ground for pink wines than Italy, but southern Italy, Sicily and Sardinia are capable of making full-bodied pink wines with enormous character. Perhaps the most characterful are those grown on the volcanic soils of Mount Etna. **Terre Nere Rosato 2010 Etna** is not expensive, is made from the two local Nerello grapes and really does taste as one imagines magma might. Not for the faint-hearted, nor for the cellar. Drink this soon, cool and with charred meat. Similar, much more expensive and extreme is **Salvo Foti, Vinudilice Rosato 2009 IGT Sicilia**, which has that apple-skin aroma that is characteristic of so-called natural wine. Foti is a folk hero in Sicilian wine who has made some of the island's most admired wines. I'd recommend this wine to any thrill seeker but not to a cautious penny pincher.

My travels in Puglia last summer opened my eyes to how good the heel of Italy can be at full-bodied pink wine such as **A Mano Primitivo 2011 IGT Puglia** but I also loved the all-Aglianico grape **Feudi di San Gregorio, Ros'aura Rosato 2011 IGT Campania.**

And the even more unusual, though not too potent, **Saparale 2011 Corse Sartène** from Corsica is as wild as you could wish - a thoroughly admirable quality in this increasingly important category of wine.

SOME FAVOURITE PINKS

Chêne Bleu 2010 Vin de Pays du Vaucluse 13%
£22.28 Justerini & Brooks

Ch Léoube, Le Secret de Léoube 2011 Côtes de Provence 13%
£20 Ocado, Corney & Barrow, Daylesford, www.rose-wine.com

Ch d'Esclans 2011 Côtes de Provence
£118 for 6 Goedhuis

Dom Vincent Delaporte 2011 Sancerre 13%
£13.95 Robert Rolls (case orders only)

Saparale 2011 Corse Sartène 13%
£13.75 Yapp Bros

Dom Bruno Clair 2009 Marsannay 12.5%
£13.28 Justerini & Brooks

Innocent Bystander, Pinot Noir 2011 Victoria 12.5%
£11.75 HarperWells

Viña Leyda, Loica Vineyard Pinot Noir 2011 Leyda Valley
£11.50 Hic Wines

Terre Nere 2010 Etna 13%
£10.78 Justerini & Brooks

Fairview, La Capra Pinotage 2010/11 Paarl 13.5%
£7.50 Co-op

Vicente Malumbres, Rosado 2011 Navarra 13.5%
£5.95 The Wine Society

See our tasting notes on about 80 reasonably interesting pink wines.