



Written by
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Can pink wine be fine?



This is a slightly longer version of an article published by the Financial Times.

See also my detailed tasting notes.

It was quite a contest. For the first time in my experience, a line-up of nearly 40 of the world's best-known rosés were pitted against each other on a blind-tasting table. We had Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's recent entry into the wine business. We had all four bottlings from the man who inherited a top château in Margaux and traded it in to try to make the world's finest pink wine in Provence. We had the three offerings from a rival attempt to pitch Provençal rosé as a luxurious wine from the British businessman Lord Bamford's Chateau Léoube. They were up against two Provençal old-timers from Domaines Tempier and Ott. Also on the table was the southern Rhône rosé from Nicole Rolet, wife of the head of the London stock exchange, and another Provençal example from a triumvirate that includes two of Burgundy's finest producers.

If rosé is a distinctly minor feature of Burgundy itself, it is becoming rather more prevalent in Bordeaux, not least as the direct result of producers trying to make their reds more concentrated by running off some pink-tinted juice before fermentation. In fact, the whole event had been organised by Château Brown of Pessac-Léognan, which has recently added a pink to its red and white output. So, of course, we tasted Brown rosé as well as both offerings from Château de Sours, a Bordeaux property that built up such a following for its (deliberately made rather than fermented run-off) pink wines that it has in the past even offered them en primeur.

But there were many examples from outside France, too. We were treated to the first-ever taste of a new attempt at a superior rosado from Chivite, producers of Spain's best-selling pink, and some of the best-known rosés from Portugal, Sicily, Chile, South Africa and Australia.

Pink wine production is now seen as a serious business around the world – not least thanks to the efforts of Sacha Lichine (ex Ch Prieuré-Lichine) and his team at Château d'Esclans in Provence, which has really raised the bar of ambition among producers, particularly with their top-of-the-range bottling Garrus, currently retailing for almost £100 a bottle. It would therefore not have been difficult to have doubled the number of wines at this blind tasting, but the selection gave a good overview of the current state, and wildly varying styles, of today's rosé wine production.

Particularly in Provence, where pink has long been the dominant wine colour, bottle shapes have become particularly creative. There are skittles, cylinders, glass boxes and ever more distinctive variants. For this reason, all 36 wines were decanted into identically neutral clear glass bottles, which not only usefully deprived us of any clues as to their identity, it provided an excellent view of their hues, which varied from the palest of pale greyish salmon (the typical Provençal tint) through some blueish lipstick pinks to colours so deep they were really pale reds. All the wines were 2014s except for six 2013s, mainly superior bottlings given extra ageing.

The most common impression given by these wines was of determinedly modern low-temperature fermentation aromas with more than a suggestion of paint, and such is the determination of many producers to make their rosés fresh, the acidity can sometimes taste rather jaggedly bolted on. But in practice I found some of the lower-acid wines were some of the most interesting; in some of them a slight astringency added the structure that was lacking. What I was looking for was character, and it was evident that some wines would make seriously interesting wines for the table. I was particularly pleased to have the chance to taste all four current wines from the Esclans stable – Whispering Angel 2014 from bought-in fruit that retails for about £22, Château d'Esclans 2014 itself that now also carries the words Rock Angel on the label and sells for around £29, the more oak-dominated Les Clans 2013 at £60 and Garrus 2013 from one particularly old vineyard at a bold £100 a bottle. The older, more ambitious wines did not shine for me when I tasted them blind – perhaps they are still too young, or perhaps 2013 was a particularly challenging vintage. Both Les Clans and Garrus were still unformed on the nose, still a little chewy on the palate and did not stand out from the crowd, whereas Château d'Esclans Rock Angel 2014 stood out as being the finest and most alluring wine on the table. According to all the background information supplied, this was the only wine in the tasting to contain some of the ancient Tibouren grape. Perhaps that was what appealed so strongly about the complex fume of this beautifully balanced, satin-smooth wine. It seemed to me to be the only one of the four that is reasonably fairly priced. It was this wine above all that proved to me that rosé can be a seriously fine wine.



My other candidates as fine pink'uns were three more wines from Provence, one from the Languedoc, and the one wine on the table from eastern Europe. The soft, rose-scented 2014 Pinot Noir rosé from Rossidi's Nikoleavo vineyard was definitely the surprise of the tasting. It is not even commercially available yet but should cost no more than £12 and was included by the organiser, Master of Wine Richard Bampfield (pictured), who represents Château Brown in the UK, 'because we are all so enthusiastic about the progress being made in eastern Europe'.

My other three Provençal favourites were the current, 2014 vintage of the old standby Clos Mireille from Domaine Ott (about £35), Domaine de la Ribotte's Cuvée Anaïs 2014 from Bandol (£15) and the middle-ranking Bamford rosé Secret de Léoube 2014 (£21). But I was also hugely impressed by Ch La Sauvageonne (£13) from the emperor of the Languedoc Gérard Bertrand, who has added this jewel of a property high in Terrasses du Larzac to his empire.

So what about Brangelina's artfully bottled Miraval 2014, yours for £17.99 from Majestic and M&S and made, on their Provençal estate where Jacques Loussier once installed a recording studio, with considerable input from the Perrins of the southern Rhône? It was certainly above average; I marked it a notch above Whispering Angel, the most basic Esclans offering - and gave it exactly the same score as Château Brown pink.

Niepoort's Redoma 2014 Douro was one of the most distinctive rosés of the 36 tasted. Fermented in oak and swathed in peachy fruit, it was made from a blend of Portuguese local varieties, has only 12% alcohol and an assertively dry finish. This was just one of several wines that proved rosé need not be reserved for aperitif drinking. Like several Bandols, the only Tavel and several others, this one was surely designed to be drunk with food.

BEST VALUE FINE PINKS

The following 2014s, listed in increasing price order, offer the best price/quality ratio.

Segura Viudas, Clos Juvència, Catalunya
£12 not yet available

Ch La Sauvageonne, Coteaux du Languedoc

£12.99 Majestic

Dom des Diabes, Bonbon, Côtes de Provence-Ste Victoire
£13.95 Lea & Sandeman

Niepoort, Redoma, Douro
£13.99-£14.99 Corks of Cotham, Highbury Vintners and other independents

Kleinood, Tamboerskloof Syrah, Stellenbosch
£14.29 South African Wines Online, Marc Fine Wines

Ch de Léoube, Rosé de Léoube, Côtes de Provence
£14.50 Davys, Daylesford, Goedhuis

Dom de la Ribotte, Cuvée Anaïs, Bandol
£14.95 Stone Vine & Sun

Ch La Sauvageonne, Coteaux du Languedoc
£12.99 Majestic



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