

*From the Los Angeles Times*

## WINE & SPIRITS

# Rosé has its day in the sun

They've flirted for years, but now sommeliers are finally committing to the pinks they love.

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WITH their gorgeous hues, lively aromas and vivid flavors, rosés have the ideal prescription for summertime fun in a glass. Certainly producers and importers have caught on: More rosé is in the pipeline, from more places, than ever. There's no shortage of wines from traditional French sources such as Provence, the Languedoc and the Rhône, but new imports are also turning up from new places: the Piedmont, Friuli and Abruzzo in Italy and Spain's Penedes, Rioja and Bizkaia -- not to mention Germany and New Zealand. Even domestic producers, successfully fighting off the white-Zin stigma, have embraced rosés in increasing numbers. Pink's got chops like never before.

It's a trend that's been building -- and much discussed -- in recent years. But for all the buzz, the selection of pinks on restaurant wine lists has been limited at best.

Until now.

Suddenly, instead of just one or two choices, a number of Los Angeles restaurants have begun to offer several -- Il Grano has seven by the glass, Wilshire Restaurant has eight, Joe's has five; on Pizzeria Mozza's diminutive list, there are four, and in mid-July Campanile broke all the rules by introducing a rosé page that lists 13 wines by the glass. "I just needed to throw it out there," says Campanile wine director Jay Perrin. "We're lucky; we have customers who are willing to try something new for the fun of it. We just wanted to say, 'Hey, it's hot out there; try this.' "

Perrin says he nearly lopped off his entire selection of red wines from the list -- except for a single chilled Loire red. "I figured, 'Chef Peel's entire menu is seasonal; why can't the wine list have that same metamorphosis?'" (Colleagues on the staff intervened.)

As far as restaurants go, no wine seems better suited to handle summer menu demands. A well-made rosé can bring together the best qualities of red and white wines -- decent body, rippling acidity, the ability to hold a chill, and even a bit of tannic resolve. When you ask, most sommeliers are practically rhapsodic about how much they love rosé.

And yet for all their forward momentum, rosés have always seemed to lag behind reds and whites on wine lists, their numbers dwarfed by big-gun reds and Chardonnays. Wine directors may have professed love, but when it's come to commitment, they've seemed rather cool and distant.

That seems to be changing this summer. Not only do rosés have a more substantial presence on wine lists, but that presence now includes a wider range of styles. Now rosé, a wine that no one ever seemed to take seriously, has got people thinking.

It hasn't been easy to reach this point. For years, sommeliers have had an uphill climb just to get people to try a pink wine. Rosé's lingering association with white Zinfandel may account for part of this; cloying white Zins have left a lot of people swearing off pink altogether, as Dana Farner of Cut in Beverly Hills notes: "As much as we all love it and the wine-loving public is learning to love it, prejudices still exist."

Matt Straus of Wilshire in Santa Monica says that among the general public, the category can seem fairly monolithic. "Nearly everyone tends to group all pinks, regardless of color, blend, place of origin, into one big kick-line," he says.

## **Delicate to muscular**

IN singing the praises of the entire category, sommeliers have had to be a little monolithic themselves just to get people to the edge of the glass. Part of their stratagem has been to convince diners that rosé captures a mood -- sunny, light, playful, summery -- more than most wines. Like Champagne, whose merits as a wine are never fully detached from its role as a celebratory beverage, rosé has been marketed as a symbol.

But it turns out there's a lot to think about. Rosé isn't one flavor, it's several, a salmon-hued spectrum that on one end replicates the best of what white wine has to offer, and on the other, offers a great deal of what red wine does best. That's a huge range, from delicate, strawberry-scented Beaujolais rosés to amped up, muscular California versions. "People order it for fun," says Water Grill's Cara Bertone. "Only when they have it in front of them do they realize it's a serious wine."

Of course even if diners love rosé, that may not be enough to persuade them to order it. Psychological barriers remain. It may not have the gravitas or seem special enough for the occasion. Or it may not provide closure to the evening the way a more substantial red wine would. "It's like a dangling modifier," says Il Grano's Peter Birmingham. "For a lot of diners, a meal isn't complete without a big red, the big finish."

Setting aside problems of perception, many sommeliers encounter practical problems when committing to rosé. For one thing, it's cheap to make. Most are made in steel tanks, without oak and with minimal handling and cellar time. So they tend to crowd a low price point -- on a wine list, that's around the \$35 mark. Sommeliers must determine just how many \$35 rosés they can have on the list before the wines start to cancel each other out.

And rosés tend to have a short shelf life. Nearly all are earmarked for immediate consumption, when their fresh fruit flavors are at a peak. It's true that some rosés age quite well -- Bandols and other Côte de Provence pinks hold up for three or four years; Straus at Wilshire carries a transcendent 12-year-old Spanish *rosado* from the great Rioja producer López de Heredia. But most are best drunk young.

As a result, rosé, like white linen and espadrilles, has a season. Sommeliers must take care with how much they buy and when they buy it. "If you don't sell them by September, that's it; you're stuck with a wine past its prime," says David Rosoff of Pizzeria Mozza. (Of course, a well-made rosé hasn't lost its versatility by the end of September. "I don't think there's a better wine for Thanksgiving than a robust rosé," says Chris Keller of Joe's in Venice.)

Despite obstacles, sommeliers are pressing forward with their pink agenda. The selections at Campanile and elsewhere represent styles that graze attributes of white and red wines alike: light, clean high-acid wines from Spain and Italy; silky *vins gris* from Burgundy and Oregon that hint at the subtleties of Pinot Noir; and from California's Central Coast, more robust examples derived from Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre that act like red wines. That's a range, Perrin says, that can pair with everything from a light salad to grilled fish to roast pork.

## Focus on food, not mood

WHICH is the sort of latitude in a wine that a sommelier relishes. And now, with more selections on the lists -- more choices -- there are more ways that rosés can intersect with the menu. Rosés are breaking away from being a mood-driven choice. Their role as delicious counterpoint is something diners have begun to discover, one dish at a time, on tasting menus especially.

For example at Il Grano, Birmingham has discovered how differently certain pink wines play against the herbal components on chef Sal Marino's annual tomato menu.

A Piedmont wine, the Lacrima di Morro d'Alba Rosato from Luigi Giusti, he says, "is especially well-mannered at the tomato table." But for a tomato salad garnished with arugula, he employs the much richer Paso Robles rosé from Villa Creek called Pink. Meanwhile, he pairs the iconic Provençal rosé, Domaines Ott, with any tomato adorned with basil. "Basil is the Ott's herb accent," he says. "A drizzle of olive oil, *fleur de sel*, freshly torn herbs and you're good to go."