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## PINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Recommended rosés, \$10-\$20

By Laurie Daniel for the Mercury News

I've long been singing the praises of dry rosé, especially for summer quaffing. These aren't the cloying "blush" wines of old. I'm talking about pink wines that are juicy, refreshing and dry or barely off-dry. Many of them are also quite inexpensive.

Consumers clearly are catching on. Sales of dry rosé have been rising at a healthy clip for the past few years. The Nielsen Co., which tracks wine sales as well as TV viewers, reports that the growth in sales of premium rosé far outpaced the growth in overall table wine sales in 2008. The same was true in 2007.

But a lot of people still harbor misconceptions about pink wine. I poured a couple of rosés as aperitifs during a recent dinner party, and our guests were exclaiming about how surprising the wines were — fresh, fruity and, above all, not sweet, as they had been expecting.

Wineries and importers have been responding to the growth in consumer demand with a slew of pink wines. Production of any particular wine is often relatively small, but there are still plenty of bottles to choose from these days.

Rosé sparkling wines often are a blend of red and white wines, and that method is sometimes used for still wines, as well. But the best rosé still wines are made by crushing red grapes, then separating the juice from the skins, which is where the color is.

Very brief contact results in a pale wine, while longer contact yields a deeper color. That's the way rosé traditionally has been made in Europe, but the European Union has proposed allowing blending of red and white, a suggestion that has generated a firestorm of opposition. Domestically, there are no such limitations, but many U.S. wineries follow the traditional method.

Rosé can be the byproduct of a winemaker's desire to make a more intense red wine. Some juice is bled off after the grapes are crushed, then is fermented into rosé. The juice that's left behind — which will be made into red wine — gets more contact with the skins, seeds and stems, and thus more color, tannin and flavor. One potential problem with this method is alcohol: If the grapes are very ripe, the pink wine, as well as the red, will have elevated alcohol. I find that very few rosés can successfully carry more than 14 percent alcohol.

An approach that's getting more common is to pick grapes for rosé a little early, resulting in a wine that's fresher and crisper, without the burn of alcohol.

I've tasted more than three dozen pink wines in recent weeks, all from the 2008 vintage. Some will claim otherwise, but rosés hardly ever get better with extended aging. Better to drink them when they're young and fresh.

A rosé can be made from any red grape. I generally prefer those made from pinot noir or Rhone grapes, such as syrah and grenache, but I've tasted some delicious pink wines made from tempranillo, sangiovese, even cabernet sauvignon or merlot.

**CALIFORNIA, WASHINGTON:** Grenache can make a very pretty rosé. A perennial favorite of mine from the Santa Ynez Valley is the 2008 Beckmen Vineyards Grenache Rosé (\$18), with its lively cherry and cranberry flavors; the blend includes a little syrah and mourvedre. The 2008 Quivira Wine Creek Ranch Grenache Rosé (\$16) from Dry Creek Valley is a little softer, with bright strawberry and raspberry. The Ventana Vineyards Dry Rosado (\$18) from Arroyo Seco is mostly grenache; it displays bright cherry flavors and a subtle herbal note.

Other pink blends of Rhone grapes include the 2008 Robert Hall Rosé de Robles (\$15) from Paso Robles, which is fresh and juicy, with lots of fruit, particularly cherry and strawberry, and the 2008 Bonny Doon Vin Gris de Cigare (\$15), which includes a dollop of white wine and is fresh and bright, with cherry, crushed strawberry, raspberry and a hint of apple.

Iron Horse Vineyards is a reliable producer of pink wine made from pinot noir; its 2008 Rosé de Pinot Noir (\$20) is fresh and crisp, with juicy cherry and cranberry flavors (and only 12.9 percent alcohol). The 2008 J Vineyards Vin Gris (\$20), another pink pinot, has juicy cherry and raspberry fruit and just a hint of sweetness, while the 2008 Etude Pinot Noir Rosé (\$20) is a pretty wine, with raspberry and cherry flavors and zippy acidity. From the Columbia Valley, the 2008 Charles & Charles Rosé Volume III (\$12) is made from syrah and is brimming with zippy cherry and cranberry.

**FRANCE:** France has a long tradition of rosé, particularly in the south. The southern Rhone even has an appellation devoted to rosé: Tavel. A good example is the 2008 Maison Bouachon "La Rouviere" Tavel (\$17), with its bright raspberry and cranberry flavors and hints of watermelon and white pepper. Two bargain-priced wines from elsewhere in southern France are the 2008 Bieler Pere et Fils Rosé (\$11) — mostly cabernet, with some syrah and grenache — which is bright and lively, with fresh raspberry and watermelon, and the 2008 La Vieille Ferme Rosé (\$9), a refreshing blend displaying bright cherry and raspberry fruit.

**SPAIN:** Spain has some excellent values in pink wine made from grapes ranging from grenache (called garnacha in Spain) and mourvedre (known as monastrell) to tempranillo and carignane (carinena). The 2008 Tapeña Rosé (\$10), for example, is bright and lively, with cherry and cranberry notes and a long finish. The 2008 El Coto Rioja Rosé (\$12) is quite zingy, with cranberry and citrus flavors, and the 2008 Torres Sangre de Toro Rosé (\$11) offers pretty cherry and strawberry flavors and finishes with a slight tannic edge.

**DOWN UNDER:** From New Zealand, the 2008 Wild Rock Vin Gris Rosé (\$17) — mostly merlot, along with some pinot noir and syrah — has bright flavors of cherry and berry and just a hint of tannin. The 2008 Angove's Nine Vines Rosé (\$13) from Australia, a blend of grenache and shiraz, is pretty and soft, with strawberry and cherry fruit and a little spiciness.

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