

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

June 1, 2009

## American Rosé Stalls Out

*The pink refreshers haven't improved much in five years, but there are crisp standouts*

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER

When you walk into a wine store over the next few weeks, you may be confronted with a pink tide. Not too many years ago, wine stores hid rosé wines in the back as if they were racks of Playboy. Now rosés are front and center, and the selection has never been greater. Rosés are arriving from all over the world - we had pretty good ones recently from both Austria and Greece - and, with so much competition, prices have dropped, too.

In past tastings, we have found that rosés from France continue to set the standard. Vintners in places like Tavel and Provence grow grapes specifically for rosé, which is generally made by leaving the colorless juice of grapes in contact with the red skins for a short time. They have been making rosé for a very long time and have passion for rosé - and it shows. We have also been impressed with a new generation of rosés from Spain.

In a tasting of American rosé wines from the 2007 and 2008 vintages, these were our favorites. While rosés are always good for sipping alone, our favorite rosés have the kind of fruit, acidity and backbone to stand up to summer foods, from chilled salmon to roast chicken and shrimp. Beckmen, Toad Hollow, Bonny Doon, Etude and Sinskey are all repeat favorites. Because many of the 2008 wines are just arriving on the market, prices are even more variable than usual.



Jeff Bush

**Bonny Doon Vineyard Vin Gris de Cigare 2008 (California).** \$15. Very Good. Beautiful pink-rose color, with real fruitiness, some tannins, mouthfeel and weight. Oozes charm. Mostly Grenache. We also liked the 2007.

When we first conducted a broad, blind tasting of U.S. rosé a decade ago, it was hard to find enough to sample. Winemakers and store owners told us that Americans associated pink wine with White Zinfandel, or perhaps Mateus and Lancers, and didn't want any part of it. Robert Sinskey Vineyards, which makes one of our longtime favorite U.S. rosés, says that when it first made its Vin Gris of Pinot Noir in 1991, "we could not give it away. No one would buy it.... White Zinfandel was everywhere." Still, in our tasting back in 1999, we did find a few good ones. In 2004, five years later, we tried again and found that American rosés had improved in both quality and quantity. Winemakers were beginning to get just the right combination of fruit and acidity and were beginning to have the confidence to make their rosés dry and food-friendly. And consumers were noticing. Sinskey, for instance, now says that its rosé is "our fastest-selling wine."

So, five years later, where do we stand? Has the improvement continued? We bought every rosé we could find from the 2007

and 2008 vintages for another broad, blind tasting. Fact is, even now, in the universe of rosé wines, it's harder to find an American one than some from other places, but they're out there, and not just from California. We tried one recently from Washington primarily made from Blaufränkisch, and some smaller U.S. wineries with limited distribution make good ones. For years, we have liked Wölffer Estate rosé from New York's Long Island, and the 2008 is its best in some years (\$16). In our sampling, a few of the wines cost more than \$20, but most cost around \$12.99 to \$20. We tasted them in blind flights over several nights.

We found, unfortunately, that there hasn't been much progress in the past five years, when we felt the wines were starting to hit their stride. Too many of these seemed like throwaways - maybe good for cash flow and probably something the wineries need to serve in the tasting room, but made with a lack of real passion and care. Especially considering that U.S. rosés often cost more than pinks from elsewhere - and especially France and Spain - we're simply not sure that we'd pick up an American rosé as our first choice. Some lacked the courage of their convictions and, to us, even an informal wine needs to have vision and some sort of guiding principle to make it stand out.

There were, however, some excellent exceptions that show what American rosé can be. They were made from Pinot Noir, Grenache, Syrah and Grignolino (that would be Heitz, an old favorite that we know brings a smile to the faces of many people who have tried it over the years). They had clean, crisp smells and tastes of strawberries and watermelon - sometimes with the most fetching hints of pink roses - with good acidity and, in most cases, some stuffing underneath. They were easy yet not frivolous, fun but not forgettable. Unfortunately, while half of our sample cost less than \$15.99, only two of our favorites did, and only one cost less than \$10, our longtime favorite Toad Hollow.

Some of the best wines in our tasting are at least somewhat widely available, but most are fairly limited-production, including our best of tasting, Beckmen Grenache Rosé. Steve Beckmen, director of winemaking and viticulture, told us the winery made 1,000 cases that ultimately will be distributed in about 20 states. We asked him: What's the secret to a good rosé? "The key is to grow and harvest and make your picking decisions based on making a rosé wine," he said. "You need to have the wine in mind from the beginning of the season. We actually have vineyards that are dedicated for our rosé program. They are farmed with that in mind. We farm them differently. We want to encourage them to give us good flavor at low alcohol. We pick maybe a good three to four weeks ahead of red picking for those grapes." The wines therefore keep good acidity, he said. In addition, Beckmen ferments the wine, which includes some Syrah and Mourvèdre, in a combination of stainless steel and neutral barrels, which "keeps the flavors really clear and focused and fruit driven. It's as simple as that."

Mr. Beckmen said the winery has been making rosé since 1995. "I came back from France after drinking quite a bit of rosé in Provence and I was hooked. Since then I've been making a rosé." Not that it was easy at first. "When we started with rosé, people were thinking White Zin. It's taken a long time for people to open up and start to be interested. It's still not the easiest thing in the world, but it's easier than it was.

"It's nice that the world is catching up to us a little bit now."

- Melanie Grayce West contributed to this article.