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ROSE WINES FOR SUMMER SIPPING

By Louis Marmon

Real wine lovers drink pink. Not the semi-sweet mass-produced “white” California travesty or the stuff from the squat oval bottle we boomers made into candle holders. The pink wines worth drinking are the Rosés made by serious winemakers for a more discerning public. Their fresh fruit flavors, refreshing acidity and reasonable prices make Rosés perfect for this summer’s warm weather.

While Rosé sparkling wines are held in high regard, the still Rosé wines have lingered in relative obscurity. This trend is reversing with 2008 Rosé sales increasing nearly 50 percent corresponding with an increase in visibility on restaurant wine lists. Rosés hold an intermediate place in versatility matching well with foods that need something less than a red wine but more than a white. Especially tomato-based dishes like gazpacho and pizza, light summer pastas, mild cheeses, grilled tuna or shrimp and spicy fare including curry and Thai peanut chicken.

While the sparkling Rosés can be made with a blend of red and white grapes, the still Rosés in Europe are created exclusively from red varietals. Much to the chagrin of traditional winemakers, the European Union is contemplating changing that regulation to allow white and red wines to be blended together to create non-bubbly Rosés. Until that controversy is settled, European Rosés and most others elsewhere will continue to be made in one of two methods. The most popular is to allow the skins to stay in contact with the juice only long enough to impart some color, sometimes only a few hours and generally no longer than two or three days. The other is known as Saignée or the “bleeding of the vats” whereby a portion of the wine is drained off early in fermentation to concentrate the flavors and deepen the color of the remaining wine.

Pretty much every red varietal has been made into Rosé including Malbec, Pinot Noir, Grenache, Sangiovese, Syrah, and Zinfandel which means that all Rosés do not taste the same. Nearly every wine producing region has at least one example with some of the finest coming from France’s Tavel region. Other tasty Rosés originate from regions as diverse as California, South Africa, Chile, Italy, New Zealand and Israel. Since the flavors and acidity fade rather quickly, Rosés are best enjoyed within two years of harvest. Slightly chilled is best. Too cold and the more subtle fruit flavors do not come through.

A perennial favorite is the **Bonny Doon Vin Gris de Cigare 2008** (\$13). The refreshingly irreverent winemaker Randall Graham is known for ignoring rules so it is not surprising to find that he has combined red and white varietals to create this beauty. A blend of Grenache, Cinsault, Syrah, Mourvedre, Grenache Blanc and Roussanne it exhibits complex, spicy strawberry, orange and raspberry flavors with a touch of cinnamon and mint at the end.

Award winning Rosés are being produced in one of California’s lesser-known wine regions, Temecula. Located about 50 miles north of San Diego in the Temecula Valley, The South Coast Winery also boasts a spa, restaurant and 76 luxurious guest villas among the vineyards. Winemakers Jon McPherson and Javier Flores craft a number of notable wines including the lovely **South Coast Winery Grenache Rose 2007** (\$14) that was recently honored as California’s best pink wine. Candied citrus and red flower aromas lead into red berries and spicy strawberries along a tight acid frame.

Aurelio Montes is responsible for some of Chile’s best wines. Made from 100 percent Syrah grown near the Pacific coast, the **Montes Cherub Rosé of Syrah 2008** (\$15) offers seductive scents of rose petal, orange peel and strawberry. Bright cherry and strawberry flavors predominate with brisk acidity and a firm lingering finish.

Among the many noteworthy South African wines is the charming **Graham Beck Rosé 2008** (\$12). A third generation family-owned enterprise, their sparkling non-vintage Brut was opened by the Obamas to toast their November 4th election win. This 100 percent Pinotage Rosé has lively red cherry, raspberry and watermelon notes along with a touch of smokiness during the finish.

Other recommendations include the **Paul Jaboulet Aîné Parallele 45 Rosé** (\$9) that hails from France’s Rhone Valley. A blend of Grenache, Cinsault and Syrah it exhibits apple and floral aromas that extend into tart red berries, currants and raspberries coupled with a pleasing minerality. The slightly sweet 100 percent **Merlot Kim Crawford Gisborne Rosé 2007** (\$12) has a bit of pepper along with strawberries and red cherries. Wonderfully smooth and delicate, the **La Scolca Rosato Vino da Tavola 2008** (\$14) displays figs and dried cherries while the crisp cherry, strawberry and raspberry flavors seem to burst from the El Coto de Rioja Rosado 2008 (\$9) created from Garnacha and Tempranillo.

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