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A SYMPHONY OF NEW WORLD ROSÉS

By Dave McIntyre

For a couple of decades, California rosé meant white zinfandel, a semisweet, sodalike confection with an alcoholic kick that was enormously popular with consumers but anathema to wine lovers who favor the dry, refreshing rosés of France, Italy and Spain. Dry California rosés were rare, especially outside California. (I have a sneaking suspicion they kept them for themselves.)

Today, rosés from throughout the New World, not just California, are reaching our retail shelves. That's because consumers have realized that a well-chilled rosé is an ideal hot-weather wine and because modern techniques have wineries concentrating their red wines by "bleeding" some of the juice off the skins during fermentation, a technique called saignée. Instead of discarding this pink-hued juice, they make rosé. However, as in the Old World - the area I focused on in last week's column - the best rosés are those that are intended to be pink, whose grapes are picked earlier with stronger acidity to give the wine verve and structure.



Bonny Doon Vineyard was one of the pioneers in California rosé, producing its first with the 1981 vintage. Winemaker Randall Graham initially decided to make it to concentrate his Rhone-style red wines and "because I like rosé," he recalled in a recent e-mail exchange. Today, most of the grapes are grown with rosé in mind, so Graham has them picked when acidity is still high, earlier than if he were making red wine to bleed off extra juice as rosé. That way, "there is no need for wholesale manipulations" to artificially alter the balance of the wine. Graham is transitioning his vineyards to biodynamic viticulture, so he uses indigenous yeasts rather than adding commercial yeast, "which seems to be helpful in avoiding those confected notes" from fermentation, he said.

Bonny Doon's Vin Gris de Cigare is a dry rosé in the style of Provence, but Graham cheats a bit to achieve that effect. To tame the fruitiness of his California red grapes, he adds some white wine. The 2008 vintage, recently released by the winery, contains 10 percent roussanne and 3 percent grenache blanc, two white grapes native to southern France. The rest consists of the red grapes grenache, cinsault, mourvedre and syrah.

Blending red and white wines to make rosé is taboo in much of southern France, where rosé is king, and the European Union sparked outrage recently when it proposed legalizing the practice. (Protests by growers scuttled the proposal.) Graham scoffed at the brouhaha. "If you want to add some white wine to your rosé and it improves the blend, then do it!" he said.

New World rosé does not come with centuries of tradition or regulations, so winemakers here are free to break the rules and rewrite the recipe. Because New World rosés come from a variety of places and are made with a wide range of grapes, it is difficult to know exactly what to expect when you pull a cork or twist a screw cap. Colors cover the spectrum from pale orange to cherry red, and anywhere along that range, flavors could be bone-dry or sappy, with a hint of residual sweetness.

Some of the grape combinations would sound bizarre to a Provencal vigneron. Wild Rock, a new label from New Zealand's Craggy Range winery, offers a rosé of merlot, malbec, syrah and pinot noir. Bright red in color and exuberant with its fruit, it is crisp, refreshing and delicious.

Others achieve New World success with Old World formulas. At Alexander Valley Vineyards in Sonoma County, winemaker Kevin Hall produced an exceptional rosé made entirely of sangiovese, the main red grape of Tuscany. "A rosé is something I always wanted to do," said Hall, who made his first rosé with the 2006 vintage. "We came across a vineyard that was well situated for rosé, and the grower was willing to do the vineyard work - leaf pulling, especially - and pick the grapes earlier, when the sugar levels were not so high." The wine is fermented and "aged" - for just a few months - entirely in stainless steel, with nary a whiff of oak.

For his first two vintages, Hall kept the juice on the skins for 18 hours to give the wine a vibrant red color. In 2008, the vintage now on the market, "there was a lot of color in the skins, so we drained the juice after six hours," he said. "It still colored up like crazy."

Crazy is a good word for it. Crazy good. Crazy fun. Crazy delicious.

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