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Pretty in pink: the rise of rosé

How it became the most successful wine category of the past two decades



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[Pink wine is surging](#). It's been by far the most successful wine category of the past two decades, with a 40 per cent rise in global consumption between 2002 and 2018 while other still-wine categories barely managed single-digit rises. Global pink-wine production has tripled in the past quarter of a century.

This is little celebrated in wine circles, where orange or cloudy yellow are the fashionable hues. The kind of [pink wines](#) that have ploughed their way to market prominence are wistful rose-petal pinks, in designerly clear-glass, with scents and flavours that don't detain so much as disarm, sinking through the mouth and down the throat like foam, cream or a soft-fruited smoke of dry ice.

There's little for geeks here: no handles or horns. And that, indeed, may be a part of their attraction for the rest of humanity. At last: a wine category that doesn't require months of study to understand, and in whose aromas and flavours drinkers are not urged to identify the contents of an [Arcimboldo painting](#).

You've probably guessed already: this apparent simplicity is misleading. Such artful pinks are the most technically sophisticated still wines ever made. They require swift pre-dawn harvesting on a single, perfectly calibrated day; optical sorting machines to defenestrate sub-par grapes; chilling equipment for grapes and juice; subtle pressing under inert gases; cool fermentation and cunning use of lees; bottling under more inert gas.

Their appeal is based on the impression of freshness allied to a graceful weight and presence in the mouth, with all-important creaminess. They are dry but rounded — without the vulgarity of sugar. Their acidity is subtle and gently fruit-infused, never “crisp”; by dint of the softly sinewy quality of viscosity, they can partner food as well as satisfy and slake on their own. Not simple at all, but cunning little wine machines that whirr and click with minutely engineered understatement.

The description above constitutes the Provence rosé ideal, and Provence has trounced the opposition in the pink-wine explosion, with regional exports up 500 per cent in the past 15 years, and with 89 per cent of its vineyards now producing rosé.

FTWeekend Festival



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The model for Provençal success has been [Sacha Lichine's](#) Ch d'Esclans and Caves d'Esclans, together with its all-conquering Whispering Angel brand — now the top-selling still French wine by dollar sales in the US. Lichine's wines alone account for 6.5 per cent of the entire production of the enormous Côtes de Provence appellation.

The success of Lichine's endeavour, regarded as a Quixotic tilt by the vendor of Ch Prieuré-Lichine in Bordeaux's Margaux when he began in 2006, has been such that Moët Hennessy acquired a majority shareholding in December 2019.

It derived from two key insights. One was the application of vanguard techniques from Bordeaux and Burgundy (like those outlined above) to the making of ambitious Provence rosé. The other was to co-ferment white Rolle grapes with red (up to 20 per cent Rolle, according to the vineyard planting rules). This variety, also known as Vermentino in Italy, works brilliantly with the fruit-bringing Grenache and Cinsault, adding to the wines' aromatic subtlety, chew and wealth of mouthfeel — as well as pulling the colour back.

Cédric Jenin is chief winemaker and research director at Castel Frères, which has its own Provence estate (Ch Cavalier) as well as owning the rosé giant Listel, and Barton & Guestier, which makes rosé in Bordeaux, Anjou and Provence.

He stresses the complex requirements of the style, from the usefulness of irrigation (to avoid stressing the vines and degrading acid levels in the grapes) to picking at the perfect moment (just before full phenolic or flavour maturity) and fining the juices to rein back colour and help keep oxidation at bay.

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“Provence,” he notes, “has had 30 or 40 years to focus both technical developments and vineyard investments on rosé.” Master of Wine (and Provence resident) Elizabeth Gabay, author of the useful *Rosé: Understanding the Pink Wine Revolution*, also feels Provence’s success has been due to “timing.

It was ahead of the game with improving quality throughout the 1990s so that by the time 2003 and subsequent hot summers came, it was ready. Then you had Lichine, [Brad Pitt](#) and Angelina Jolie . . .”

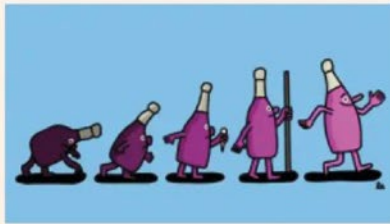
The film-star reference is to rosé-producing Ch Miraval, once a home to (and still owned by) the now-parted actors — and such a prodigiously successful and beautifully packaged Provençal rosé brand in its own right that it is rumoured to be a reason why no divorce settlement has been finalised.

This brand-friendliness is another advantage for Provence and for rosé in general: the iconography of the Côte d’Azur makes a perfect springboard for commercial as well as oenological endeavour, for design as well as content.

Rapper Post Malone has just released a Provence rosé called Maison No 9 — and managed to sell 50,000 bottles over one weekend of pre-sale on Vivino. Jon Bon Jovi and his son Jesse produce several pink wines (from Languedoc this time, made in conjunction with Gérard Bertrand) branded Hampton Water. Kylie Minogue’s newly launched Rosé, a Vin de France, is hurtling out of Tesco, while Cameron Diaz’s Avaline, another Vin de France but sourced from Provence, was launched in July.

Imaginatively speaking, no wine style offers more creative potential than pink; it has more in common with perfumes than with other wines. Indeed, the Tuscan producer **Ruffino** has just launched a new pale rosé in an ultra-pretty, intricately fluted bottle that wouldn't (size aside) look out of place on a shelf of fragrances. Its perfumey name is Aqua di Venus.

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All of this is, perhaps, a pity for the rest of the pink-wine universe, which Gabay says is “hugely exciting” yet which often confronts and even contradicts the Provence aesthetic: three Gabay suggestions for expanding your horizons are listed below.

The next pink-wine frontier, meanwhile, is sparkling rosé — a challenge that has defeated Provence so far. The all-important petal pink is very hard to maintain through the full cycle of the traditional sparkling wine method used in Champagne; it's easier to achieve by the tank method used for Prosecco and some other Italian sparklers. Basic Prosecco regulations have, significantly, been extended to pink wines. They'll be with us by Christmas.

How far can pink wine go? Much further, most feel, including Gabay, who predicts that it will account for 25 per cent of global wine consumption before long. Cédric Jenin reports that pink sales have been rising throughout lockdown; indeed, pink wine has outsold white in France since 2009.

If that can happen in the land of Montrachet, Yquem and Haut-Brion Blanc, nowhere is beyond the reach of the pale pink tide.
