

Perfect charms of a summer Rose

A rosé by any other name ... proved to be a pleasant surprise!

Last year at about this time, I wrote about the perfect charms of a summer rosé.

Rosé wines are just the thing for a summer picnic, or after a dip in the pool _ or even before a dip in the pool (only a few sips, right?) _ or an early dinner, late supper ... you name it. Joyfully hued in shades of red, pink, salmon and such, the wines are fun, feisty, happy and springy, with a freshness, frivolousness and radiance that just borders on the enthusiastic.

Summers just might be made for these wines: light, refreshing and not too expensive. Perfect "anytime" drinks.

For those who might have missed last year's discussion, a quick recap: Rosés almost always are made from red wine grapes. The pigments that make wines red are in the skins of the grape, and these skins are allowed to make contact with the (colorless) grape juice briefly before being removed: just long enough to extract some pigment, which gives the rosés their color.

Rosés also can be made by a different method, called saignée (French for "blood"); the juice from just-crushed red wine grapes meant for red wine is "bled" and made into a rosé. (As an aside, this procedure results in a higher than usual ratio of skins in the remaining juice, which allows for a richer red wine.)

The lack of contact with the grape skins keeps rosés from developing the backbone and tannins of most red wines. But hey, these wines aren't meant to be brooded over. You probably won't search for the core of your soul over such wines.

Or so I thought.

Any ideas that I might have entertained _ that Rosé is a rosé is a rosé _ were called into question en route to revisiting rosés this summer. Humble pie came along with the two rosés that forced me to reconsider my previous notion that rosés shouldn't be taken too seriously, and that they're merely a very happy guzzle.

The first wine is a very intriguing Rosé from López de Heredia, a winery in the Rioja region of Spain. I've been very intrigued by this producer for awhile now, partially because of the way it seems to serenely disregard current fashion and trends, and continues to produce old-fashioned wines that are stately, graceful, subtle ... and different.

As many traditional wineries in Rioja do, López de Heredia also ages its wines for a long time, often more than a decade before the finished products come to the marketplace. And that's how I came to try López de Heredia's 1997 Viña Tondonia Crianza rosé.

Yes, you read that right: 1997. A rosé about a decade old.

Now, everybody, their brothers, mothers and I usually think of rosés as wines that one drinks fresh and young, within the first year or two of harvest. Certainly this is true of rosés in general ... but here's one that aims to persuade you otherwise.

And it does! The aging has lent this wine an unusual complexity and intriguing texture: so intriguing that you're compelled to take sip after sip, trying to feel it, figure it out. Here's a rosé that gently insists on thought. While it's rich with the lingering flavors of thin nutskins, brine and citrus, it feels almost weightless, but with a mineral, penetrating frame. Very well structured.

Even though four of the 10 years of aging takes place in oak barrels, there's almost no trace of wood. It's a fascinating wine, and beautiful to look at, as well: sort of a shade between pale copper and salmon. The wine is imported by Think Global LLC (www.thinkglobal-wine.com).

While trying not to go too gaga, we also discovered what amounts to a much younger cousin (at least in spirit) of this wine, right here in California: a rosé from Verdad. Just like the one from Lopez de Heredia, this wine also is made mostly of the Granacha grape (as Grenache is known in Spain), with a dash (15 percent) of mourvedre grape.

Louisa Sawyer Lindquist, the name behind the Verdad label, says that she experimented for more than half a decade with the combination, to get the color just right. In sunlight, the wine gleams with a lustrous polished red-copper shade. The dark copper colored foil forms a perfect ... er ... foil for the wine's color.

As for the taste, to call it simply charming diminishes this wine. Charming it certainly is, but this rosé also is more complex than many other rosés we've encountered: fruity, certainly, with musk-melon, watermelon and berry flavors. It's also overlaid with a barely perceptible, briny tang that gives it a good frame and a refreshingly acid, spicy finish.

This wine was not made or meant to be aged, but I'm curious to see how it would turn out!

Lindquist became enamored of Spanish varietals while working in the wine retail business in the Northeast (Long Island). She especially fell in love with the versatile Albariño. When she moved to California, she was struck by the similarities between the Spanish wine country and the Golden State; she decided to try her hand at producing Spanish wines, especially since not too many were around.

These days, at the winemaking facilities of her husband Bob Lindquist's Qupé _ a well-regarded winery that produces a notable Syrah, along with other Rhône varietals _ she produces (along with the rosé) a lovely Albariño. Think ripe d'anjou pears; it's a lush wine with a gently acidic frame and a citrusy, lemony finish. Very nicely aromatic, too, and reminiscent of summer blossoms of Mediterranean plants.

Visit them at verdadwines.com.

We also tasted another rosé that stands out from the general run, but this one wasn't a discovery, only because we were familiar with it beforehand: the Château d'Aqueria Tavel Rosé. Tavel is the region in France whose sole designation is for rosé wines. It has extremely arid soils; the growing season is a long, intense, sunny summer. This combination yields fruit of exceptional flavor intensity and concentration.

That, along with controlled vinification and the experienced assembly of the wine from several grapes, makes Tavel unique among rosés.

The Château d'Aqueria Tavel Rosé, like the other two rosés mentioned above, is 50 percent Grenache grape along with bits of Clairette, Cinsault, Mourvèdre and Bourboulenc. Each grape plays a role: The Grenache gives fruitiness and texture; Cinsault gives its finesse and length in the mouth; Clairette and Bourboulenc give aromas of fruit and flowers; and Mourvèdre makes for an intense, vibrant color, fruit aromas and flavors.

The wine is dry and refreshing, and finishes crisply with a long, spicy note. It's imported by Kobrand (www.kobrandwines.com).

Complex though these rosés are, they needn't complicate your summer. Even without analysis, they're very enjoyable summer drinks!

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