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IN FOCUS: THE ROSÉ REVOLUTION

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In recent years, pink wine has experienced a revolution, going from a frivolous tippie to a wildly popular celeb-backed drink. *Lucy Shaw* investigates its dramatic transformation.



For proof of how far the rosé category has come, look no further than Jeremy Clarkson. The brash, bullish former Top Gear petrol head is a huge fan of the wine. It isn't something that he drinks in secret, or admits to being a guilty pleasure – it's a wine he's openly proud of drinking.

Less than a decade ago, a man seen ordering a glass of rosé in a pub might be laughed at. Today, no one would bat an eyelid. In a recent column in The Sun newspaper, Clarkson struck upon rosé's inherent appeal. "There's no snobbishness to it. It's just something you drink because you want to feel happy."

Pink wine has not only shaken off its female-only associations, it is also moving away from being seen as a summer sipper and is proving a popular choice all year round, as Clarkson points out: "A lot of people think rosé can only be drunk at lunchtime on a hot summer's day, but it also works well when it's raining, foggy, windy, drizzling, cloudy or cold. I've drunk rosé on Bonfire Night and Christmas Day. I even took a case to the North Pole. This really is a wine for all occasions."

Rosé is proving to be one of the greatest wine success stories during the lockdown. In late May, year-on-year sales were up by over 400% at Waitrose. While popping the cork on a bottle of Champagne or Prosecco may seem poor taste during such a trying time, cracking the screwcap on a bottle of rosé and enjoying it after work in the early-evening sunshine has become a quarantine ritual for consumers keen to transport themselves, via what's in their glass, to the south of France.

"Rosé is a wine that brings joy to people, so sales have stayed strong during the lockdown, as people are relaxing with a glass in their gardens and taking rosé with them on picnics," says British-born, Provence-based Stephen Cronk, who is enjoying stonking success with his off-trade focused Mirabeau brand, which has grown to become the best-selling Provence wine brand in the UK thanks to a strong presence at retailers like Waitrose, Sainsbury's and Majestic.

Cronk sells 40% of his wine in the UK, but has recently taken pride in introducing sceptical French locals to the delights of canned rosé. "We have a wine bar in our village where our cans are on sale. The locals turned their noses up initially, but we get around it by pouring them a glass and showing them the can afterwards. The French are still not happy with screwcaps, so going from corks to cans is quite a leap," Cronk admits.

While sales of sweeter styles of rosé are in decline in the UK, dry rosés from France and Italy are surging in popularity, with Provence being for rosé what Champagne is for sparkling wine – the benchmark for quality. So much so, that winemakers from Argentina to Australia are seeking to emulate its style. While colour is not a barometer for excellence, pale pink has become consumer shorthand for quality when it comes to rosé.



Stephen and Jeany Cronk of Mirabeau



The Provence rosé category is now worth £56 million in the UK off-trade, up by 15% on a year ago. Jacques Bréban, president of the Provence Wine Council, predicts that between now and 2035, global consumption of rosé will grow by as much as 50%, as the Asian market develops a taste for drinking pink.

France remains both the leading producer and consumer of rosé, accounting for 28% of production and 36% of consumption last year. According to Nielsen, light rosé sales in the UK off-trade are up by 2% year on year to £564m, with dry rosés from France and Italy experiencing "significant" year-on-year growth. "Provence rosé has brought new shoppers into the category in the off-trade," says Gemma Cooper of Nielsen.



Pink wine pioneer, Gérard Bertrand

"Since lockdown, rosé has reported some of the strongest year-on-year growth seen over the last few years, and we expect this growth to continue into the summer as the warmer weather arrives."

Cronk believes Brits are taking rosé a lot more seriously, and many are happy to pay upwards of £20 for a bottle. "There used to be a psychological barrier with rosé, but it's an expensive wine to make and requires a lot of an investment, so there's no reason why it shouldn't be more expensive," he says.

In the US, Provence rosé's top export market, value sales are up by 10% to US\$138m, though volume sales have slid by 1.6% due to the 25% tariffs on French wine recently imposed by Donald Trump. Last year, the US accounted for just under half of Provence's value sales at export and 46% of volume sales.

Proving just how seriously Provence rosé is taken today, in the past year there have been four high profile acquisitions in the region, with a Provence pink now seen as a must-have in any wine portfolio worth its salt. Last May, luxury goods giant LVMH snapped up Château Galoupet in Côtes de Provence for an undisclosed sum.

Five months later, Chanel added to its already enviable wine portfolio, which includes Canon in Saint-Émilion and Rauzan-Ségla in Margaux, with the purchase of Domaine de l'Île on the crescent-shaped island of Porquerolles in Provence, which will be overseen by the group's head winemaker, Nicolas Audebert.

Making headlines around the world, last December, LVMH took a 55% stake in Sacha Lichine's Château d'Esclans, maker of the wildly successful Whispering Angel brand, along with Garrus, which long held the crown as the world's most expensive still rosé.

"I am delighted by the alliance with Moët Hennessy and the ability, through its backing, to continue to develop the estate in producing excellent Provence rosés. In purchasing Château d'Esclans in 2006, my aim was to produce a rosé in the manner of a fine wine," Lichine said at the time of the sale.

Capping off the recent investments in the region, last month, Château Bas in Aix en Provence was sold to Bordeaux's Castéja family for an undisclosed sum.

While Provence remains the standard-bearer for quality rosé, it is facing increasing competition from the Languedoc, where producers are shifting their focus towards more premium rosés, in addition to entry-level pinks.

The region remains the engine room for French rosé, producing a record 228 million bottles of Pays d'Oc pink in 2018, 55% more than was made in Provence that year.

In 2019, Languedoc-based co-operative, Les Vignobles Foncalieu, formed of 650 growers responsible for over 4,000 hectares of vines, sold 7 million bottles of Pays d'Oc rosé, including 530,000 bottles of its signature brands, such as the limited edition Le Versant Grenache Rosé, made in collaboration with street artist, Noon.

"The Pays d'Oc PGI is a guarantee of quality and accessibility. Our rosés are easy to consume while having a certified origin and characteristics specific to our area," a spokesperson for Vignobles Foncalieu told *db*.

One of the greatest champions of rosé in the Languedoc is Gérard Bertrand, who has been ageing pink wine in oak since the 1980s. His father instilled in him a love of rosé, and he's made it his mission to get pink wine taken seriously on the global stage. Over the past decade he has created an exemplary portfolio of rosés that cater to all occasions, from everyday sippers to rosés designed to be enjoyed with food.



LVMH has a 55% stake in Château d'Esclans



Rapper Post Malone has a Provence rosé

"I've always had a passion for rosé. In the past it was considered a by-product and not very serious, and I wanted to prove that rosé has the same qualities as white wine," says Bertrand. His most ambitious rosé project to date, Clos du Temple, launched last year.

Made from a blend of Grenache, Cinsault and Syrah, with a touch of Mourvèdre and Vioigner grown on schist and limestone soils in an eight-hectare clos that's farmed biodynamically and ploughed by horses, the inaugural 2018 vintage went on sale at just shy of £200 a bottle.

Aged in new French oak and aimed at the high-end on-trade, Bertrand believes it to be the "grand cru" of rosés. Far eclipsing Château d'Esclans' top drop, Garrus, in pricing, its lofty cost doesn't appear to be putting people off – the wine is sold on allocation, and the 2018 vintage is sold out.

"The world's top rosés are now being considered as fine wines. Rosé Champagne is more expensive than blanc, and the same thing can happen with rosé – people can enjoy it with ice cubes on the beach, but it can also be a great pairing for lobster," believes Bertrand.

In 2017, he teamed up with American rocker Jon Bon Jovi and his son, Jesse to launch high-end Languedoc rosé, Hampton Water, which is proving popular with millennials. "Celebrities like Bon Jovi are helping to make rosé fashionable with the younger generation by selling an aspirational lifestyle," says Bertrand.

Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie started a celebrity rosé trend when they bought Château Miraval in Provence in 2011. In the past month, Sex and the City star Sarah Jessica Parker and rapper Post Malone have joined the party with their own southern French pinks.

The second release from her Invivo X brand, Parker's pink was made in collaboration with St Tropez-based Chevron Vilette, while Malone's Maison No. 9 was blended by Alexis Comu, head winemaker at Château de Berne, and will be distributed by E&J Gallo.

Another trend is emerging within the world of pink wine – "designer" rosés. Last month, Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana launched a Sicilian rosé made by Donnafugata.



Called Rosa, the Provençal-style pale pink is crafted from a blend of Nerello Mascalese and Nocera grown on the northern slopes of Mount Etna and the hills of Contessa Entellina near Palermo. The bottle's colourful geometric label is inspired by the ornate detailing of traditional Sicilian horse-drawn carts.

Not wanting to be outdone, this summer, Provence producer Château Sainte Roseline is releasing a limited-edition bottle of its Lampe de Meduse 2019 rosé created by French fashion designer Christian Lacroix to celebrate its 70th anniversary, which boasts an intricate, lace-like label inspired by the wine's feminine hourglass bottle shape. Elegant but unpretentious, dry rosé is a wine with crossover appeal.

A mid point between the freshness of whites and depth of reds, its ability to pair with an array of cuisines makes it one of the most versatile food wines around. Its associations with lazy summer days and the glittering Mediterranean adds to its appeal, especially at a time when air travel feels like a distant dream.

And with producers across the globe emulating the pale pink Provençal style, and Provence estates elevating the category with oak-aged expressions with the texture and depth of a fine white Burgundy, rosé is set to reach even greater heights in its quest to be treated with the same respect as red and white.

Enjoyed as a year-round drink by men and women, and with the added cachet of the celebrity seal of approval, we've only scratched the surface of rosé's potential, as Paul Schaafsma of Benchmark Drinks points out: "Rosé is very on-trend as it's fresh, elegant and easy drinking – as soon as you sip it you want more. Stylish, sophisticated and desirable, rosé is a lifestyle in a glass of wine – it's the new Champagne."



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