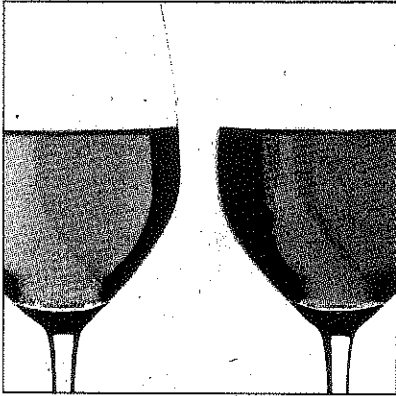


FOOD

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KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times

DISTINCTIONS: Rosés aren't just rose; they have many shades.

Beyond the first blush

PATRICK COMISKEY

More than any other wine category, rosé is a mood. There is simply nothing better on a warm afternoon, a salve for sun-drenched, heat-driven thirst. It is more often gulped than sipped, never contemplated, rarely complicated.

But there is much to say about a bottle of rosé beyond "it's empty." It's made, after all, in a broad array of styles from nearly every red grape known to man, in nearly every wine region on Earth. So before your next gulp, read on; a wine with so many shades deserves a closer inspection.

To begin, "rose" is just one of the colors it comes in. To it let's add ruby, copper, salmon, amber, almandine, maraschino, blood orange, madras and sunset and grapefruit pink, fuchsia, sepia, saffron, cayenne, pale rust and more. The wine is a painter's pal-

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Rosés bloom in

[Rosé, from Page E1]

ette for the color red — in fact, strictly speaking, many are a truer red than any red wines (which tend, of course, to be more purple).

You'd think these colors would provide clues to its taste — the darker the hue the deeper the wine, for example. Sometimes, that's true. But dark wines can also be sweeter, softened by a secondary fermentation.

In fact, the pale ones often can deceive. The coppery rosés of Bandol belie the rigor of the grape variety Mourvedre, which girds these wines with well-built, earthy tannins. Ditto the even paler rosés of the Loire, which disguise in their prettiness the pleasingly bitter grip of Cabernet Franc.

Rosé gets its color from contact with the skins of red grapes — and that color varies depending on the grape, and on how long the contact. But there are other factors, like how it's made. Sometimes the wine is a *saignée*, wherein the juice is "bled" off a larger tank of red wine (usually with the side intention of concentrating the latter). Sometimes, like a watercolor pigment, a rosé is the sum total of white and red juice.

Perhaps the best, however, are destined for rosé from the get-go, from vines grown toward that aim, with grapes allowed to macerate for a few hours or a day for color, pressed off, transformed by fermentation into the perfect sunny-day beverage.

Rosé for beginners

If you're new to rosé, it's best to start on the cheap, and many quality bottles are, most originating in southern France or Spain.

For sheer frivolity I like the wines of the Languedoc, made usually with some combination

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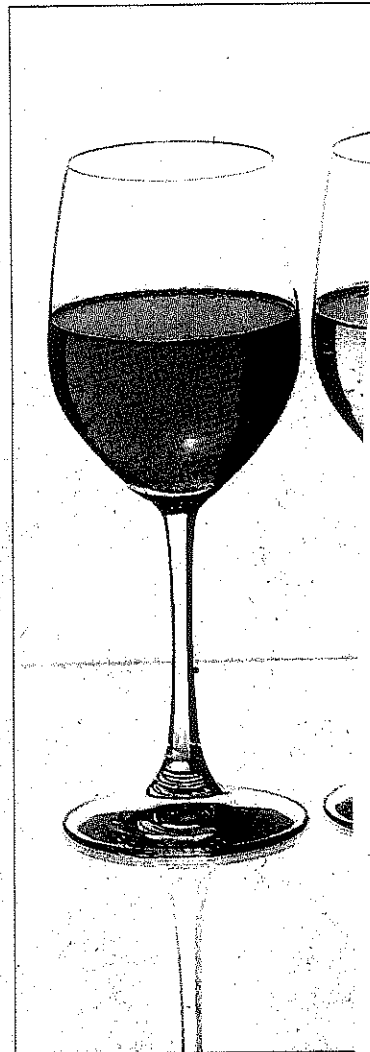
of Grenache, Cinsault and Carignane, such as the rosé from Domaine L'Hortus. Or you might try a youthful *rosado* from the Rioja; usually these are a deep color red and very inexpensive; one of my favorites comes from Faustino, but the ubiquitous Marques de Caceres is an annual steal at \$9.

Domestic bottlings are a great option too, made in a ripe style for easy drinking. New plantings of Iberian and Rhone varieties have made Mediterranean-inspired wines increasingly common, like the blend from Verdad, Rioja-style pink with lots of up-front strawberry fruit and lifted berry flavors. Or consider the delicate rosé of Syrah from Ojai Vineyard, bright juicy cherry in a pale cast. Solo Rosa puts its sentiments right there in its name (only rosé — get it?) and makes toothsome pinks from the Russian River Valley.

Rosé for experts

No one takes rosés more seriously than France; nearly every major wine region has a prominent version, including Bordeaux and even Burgundy. Odder still are Cabernet Franc rosés from the Loire, found mostly in the department of Anjou. These are strictly food wines, with a pleasing but pronounced bitterness, and a grabbing, chalky minerality ideal with something like roast chicken. All that said, the South of France, in the regions that hug the Mediterranean and the Côte d'Azur, is where rosés excel.

The most serious of all, produced by the most studious of rosé producers, would have to come from Tavel, in the southern Rhone. The entire production of the AOC is of the pink variety. The best are, in a word, intense; intensely colored, intensely flavored, and confer a grippy mineral tang to deep strawberry flavors.



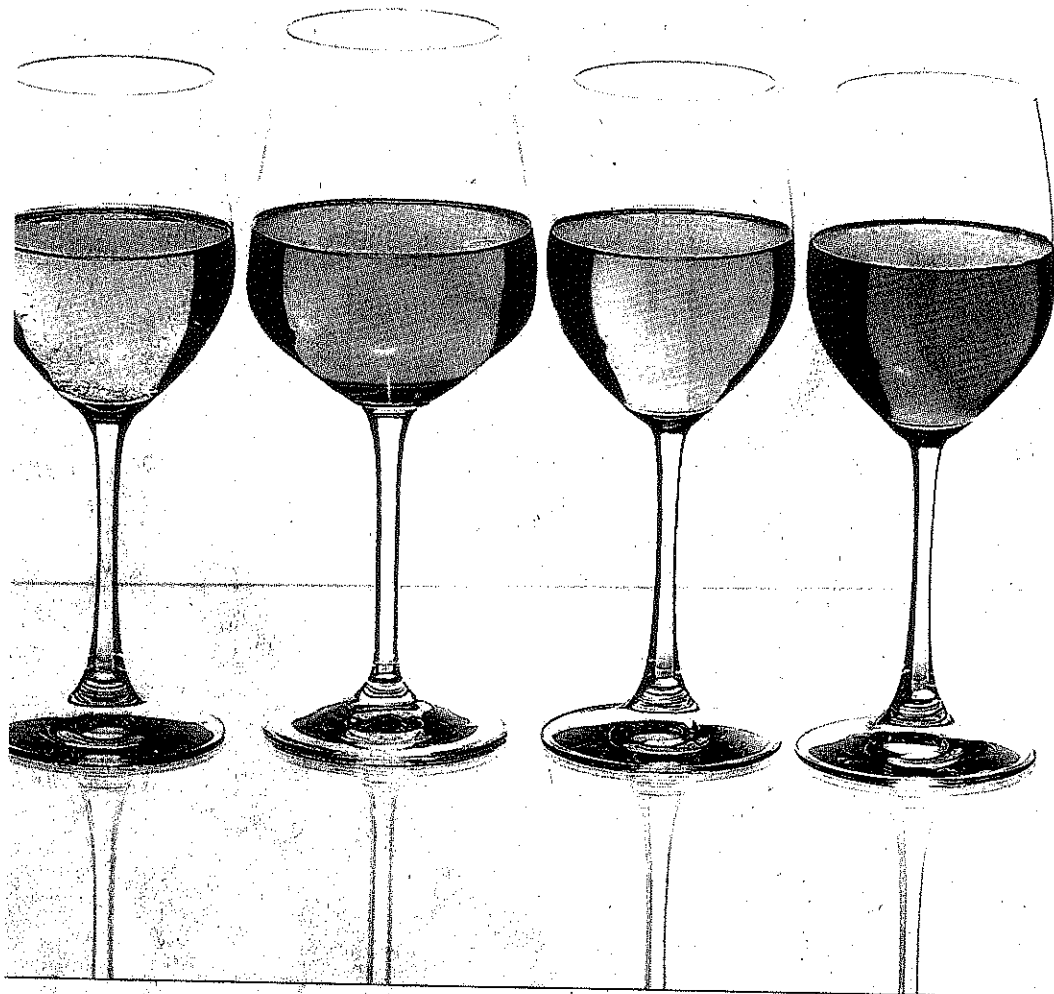
LINE 'EM UP AND LOOK:

The other serious Mediterranean rosé comes from Provence, in particular the province of Bandol. The region's most famous, Domaine Tempier, produces astonishingly complex, well-built rosés of Mourvedre and Grenache, aged in puncheons, possessing unusual depth for a pink wine. The more ubiquitous Côtes de Provence wines are less expensive, and often as good, like the old-vine bottling from Domaine Saint Andre de Figuiere, from less-storied vineyard sites.

Rosé for weirdos

Then there are those rosés so pure in intent, so oddly made, from such exotic places, that they're worth graduating to. Some of these are traditional, some are merely willful;

many shades



The color spectrum of rosés isn't all that varies; the taste covers a broad range as well. KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times

all are unexpected, some downright weird.

To start with, two opposite extremes from Spain: From the Basque region comes a slightly fizzy, wonderfully bracing *rosado* called Txakoli, by the producer Gurrutxaga. It's made from an indigenous grape, Hondarriba Belza, which brings an *amaro*-like bitterness to the finish. And from Rioja, consider the wonderful late-release older wines from Lopez de Heredia — I found a 1998 *Vina Tondonia Rosado* that is a wonder of complexity and strangeness, with aromas of narcissus flowers and freshly tilled soil — not for everyone, but fascinating.

Italy isn't known for its rosé, but Montepulciano, in Abruzzo, has an established DOC for its Cerasuolo, a powerful *rosato*

with a deep red cherry color, firmly packed flavors, and an almondy aftertaste. There certainly isn't much Greek rosé in the market, but I found a rosé of Agiorgitiko from Gaia with the very helpful name of "14-18h" — the number of hours required for the juice to remain on skins and achieve its vivid color and strident flavors.

I wouldn't have dreamed that I'd find a German rosé, but the Rheingau producer August Kessler makes one from Pinot Noir (or as they say there, Spätburgunder) with a Kabinett level of sweetness and fierce, almost Riesling-like minerality.

Meanwhile, probably the oddest rosé I've tried from the U.S. comes from Peter Cargasacchi in the Santa Rita Hills, for his Point Concepcion label, called Celestina. It is a Pinot

Grigio, but for any Grigio lover, the look of this wine will be an affront: It is a fiery blood orange, the color of a smoky sunset.

Pinot Grigio, after all, is a white wine made from a red grape (not exactly red, but more coppery gray, which is where it gets its name). Instead of avoiding color, Cargasacchi macerates the fruit to extract it, not unlike the wines of its cousin, Pinot Noir. This wine has a richness that no Pinot Grigio could ever aspire to, and a leesy, umami-like sweetness that leavens its full-bore flavors of cherries spiced with orange peel. It leaves you with plenty to ponder in a wine that doesn't usually register a second thought.