

Is pink the new white? A complicated new era for rosé

Rosé has become a bit confusing these days - but it may be the most versatile wine of all



Image 2 out of 5

I am confused.

Over the past decade, I have spilled more ink about rosé than I'd care to remember. Always, there has been a story line.

Ten years ago, it was that not enough people drank pink wine, that it was due more attention. That,

Craig Lee/Special to The Chronicle

THE LIGHT BRIGADE, left-right: 2013 Birichino California Vin Gris 2013 Proulx Willow Creek Farm Paso Robles Grenache Rosé 2013 Fox Run Vineyards Finger Lakes Rosé of Pinot Noir 2013 Broadbent Vinho Verde Rosé 2013 Vignerons de Cases de Pene Penya Cotes Catalanes Rosé as seen in San Francisco, California, on May 21, 2014.

it got.

We have since witnessed rosé rising, rosé falling,

rosé putting on serious airs. Rosé as new status symbol, filling coolers in the Hamptons. That one of this year's picks is a project from Mr. Pitt and Ms. Jolie - yes, we went there - sums it all up tidily.

As our annual Roséxtravaganza returns this weekend, all these story lines seem to have collided.

Which is to say: At its top end, pink wine is more serious than ever. Diligent winemakers are crafting it more seriously than ever. The juggy '70s era of Mateus and Lanciers is ancient history. (Google it.)

Even the days of sneering at white Zinfandel are gone. White Zin has in fact made a modest comeback, coming full circle to its early-1970s roots as a serious dry wine.

And yet this year's crop of pink wines was alternately more intriguing and confounding than ever. After tasting more than 10 dozen rosés in recent weeks, I came away befuddled.

Let's start with the good news: Rosé finally has the respect it has long deserved - as a significant wine of its own. Afterthought no more. Pink is the new white.

Best intentions

Thus it now deserves attention year-round. Even if we're being totally obvious by proclaiming pink just as Memorial Day arrives, forget not that its charms extend beyond summer.

In the Mission District, Local's Corner is up to nearly a dozen pinks on its list. Nopa, at the edge of the Divisadero fog belt, has 10 on offer. A canteen of blushy wine is totally apropos for a Hellman Hollow fog-nic.

And yet. Has rosé handled success better than anyone with the surname Lohan? I suspect it has not. You might notice many familiar names missing from my roster this year; even some reliable rosé maestros seemed, in this latest outing, to be flavor-challenged.

In the past, I've suggested technique was to blame, particularly with rosé made from the saignée method (see sidebar). Simple logic: If you start out intending to make rosé, the resulting wine is more likely to be superior.

But technique gave scant clues to quality this time - although I should note that the most successful wines here were clearly conceived from the start as rosé. Red grapes were grown and harvested for the lower ripeness and higher acidity beneficial to pink wine.

When you start out planning to make rosé, you need to buy grapes just for that purpose. Which brings us to a conundrum, at least for California. Despite record harvests, grape costs have saddled many California rosés with serious price concerns; \$24 seems to be the new magic tipping point. Most people would consider that a pretty penny for pink.

OK, have we reached the point in the column for the usual rosé aphorisms? Don't be confused. Drink and enjoy.

To be candid, this is precisely the sort of dismissive, pay-no-mind attitude that did rosé no favors in the past. Instead, let's consider a couple of clearly hopeful signs in this complicated pink world.

One: screwcaps. A heartening number of wines are being sealed this way, and hallelujah. As wines of the moment, most of these should be easily opened at the beach or park without having to tote a corkscrew.

Grenache grows up

Another: Grenache. Everyone in the Rhone Valley is welcome to deliver an "obvi" on this one, but the American relationship with pink Grenache has been, well, confused.

Long before White Zinfandel was a punch line, sweet pink Grenache earned its share of derision. Even today, White Grenache lingers in overseas markets as a global symbol of California's cheap, sugary tendencies. So to witness a rise of great pink Grenache? It's a welcome hint of California growing up.

To the wines. Again this year, I've created a classification system for our nearly 40 recommended rosés: The Light Brigade, The Utility Players, The Heavy Hitters, The White-Tablecloth Pink.

These consignments are informal, a way to help you navigate to a pink wine that fits your mood and need. They're meant to help you think about rosé in terms of weights, textures and styles - not as one wine but as many shades in a pink rainbow.

I've added suggestions for foods to match. These, too, are informal. Rosé, more than most wines, is utterly flexible with food. Most bottles will be happy companions for anything on your table.

There's a new thrust in management thought that confusion is something to be embraced. Perhaps that's where rosé is right now - the wine world's great disruptor. (You thought it was orange wine? Sorry.)

If that's the silver lining to this complicated moment, great. In which case, I'll be Ubering over to Golden Gate Park, my canteen full of rosé.

Picks of pink for every food and occasion, Pages M6-7

1. The Utility Players

"Here's to the crazy ones," went the ad.

Well, no. Here's to the sane ones, for a change. Here's to the ones who play well with others, who don't kick the sand out of the sandbox.

This is our mainline roster, and while they may not have the pizzazz of LeBron, they are the ones you can tap in any quarter, on any evening. They don't just get it done - they quietly shine.

In wine terms, that means they are choices you can stick with all summer long, and well into our happy second summer, post-Labor Day.

2013 Le Fraghe Rodon Bardolino Chiaretto (\$15, 12.5% alcohol): Dollar for dollar, the season's pink winner. Matilde Poggi's organically farmed red Bardolino, from near the shores of Lake Garda not far from Verona, is one of my favorite light reds right now. This is Poggi's rose-hued take on a classic Veneto wine, all you could want in a summer bottle: Bardolino's peony-like flair, with juicy raspberry and tangerine, and the depth great rosé should have. Versatile as they come. (Importer: Oliver McCrum Wines)

2013 Liquid Farm Vogelzang Vineyard Happy Canyon Rosé (\$24, 11.8%): This Chardonnay specialist has found its footing with rosé, here mostly Mourvedre from eastern Santa Ynez that provides

concentration and guts. They've dubbed it a reverse mullet for being a party up front and serious in back; I respectfully disagree. This manages party-study balance all through. Pretty floral and orange curd aspects, and a rich peach and suede-like presence on the palate.

2013 Charles Joguet Chinon Rosé (\$19, 12.5%): It always seems like a hunt to find bottles of this perennial Kermit Lynch favorite. But the latest edition? Totally worth it - and a good defense of the saignée method. I am of the opinion that Cabernet Franc makes the most fun, most interesting rosé on the planet, when made right. Case in point: The grape's peppery side shows up here more as floral - full of Sichuan peppercorn, copper, lilies and driving acidity to match robust strawberry flavors. A lot of meat for pink Chinon. (Importer: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant)

2013 Matthiasson California Rosé (\$23, 11.5%): It's good there's a bit more pink this vintage from our 2014 Winemaker of the Year, because pink wine is one of Steve Matthiasson's less-known talents. A mix of Grenache and other Rhonish grapes from Yolo's Dunnigan Hills, and Syrah from the Lovell Valley between Napa and Sonoma, it's edgy - although it has been gaining weight with time in bottle. Shiso, oregano, white peach and citron ... it's all about vivacious.

2013 Heitz Cellar Napa Valley Grignolino Rosé (\$19, 13%): If I could drink one wine each summer, this might be it. One, because I love that the Heitzes have remained loyal to this grape amid Napa's tough economics. Two, because it's always delicious - what with those soaring floral scents of roses and peach blossom, plus a nectar-like side to complement its berry flavors. Pure charm, with more structure than you'd expect, enough to commend it to chicken or fatty fish like halibut.

2013 Broc Cellars Sonoma County White Zinfandel (\$22, 11.5%): Chris Brockway, like the folks at Turley, is reclaiming White Zin from the seas of sweetness. Compared to the 2012, this second edition, from the same two Sonoma sites used in his Vine Starr red, is bone-dry. There's a balance of tangy, floral aspects - peonies, raspberries, a penny-like coppery bite, and hearty anise spice. White Zin - making the snobs shut up, one glass at a time.

2013 Edmunds St. John Bone-Jolly Witters Vineyard El Dorado County Gamay Noir Rosé (\$20, 13%): Steve Edmunds nails it again with this, a pink counterpart to his joyous red Bone-Jolly. From granite soils high above 3,000 feet in the Sierra, this matches all that darker Gamay berry fruit - mulberry and currant - with the sweetness of herbs, like great fresh chervil, and a bright minerality. The quintessence of all-purpose summer wine.

2013 Miraval Cotes de Provence Rosé (\$20, 13%): Yes, this is the collaboration between the Rhone's Perrin family and two relatively obscure actors by the names of Jolie and Pitt. Prep your jokes now. If not as dramatically awesome as some have asserted, here's a solid bottleful of Provencal sunshine. Fresh with apricot and Cavaillon melon, and a tangy mandarin and jasmine side, it has subtlety lurking behind exuberant fruit. Which might be why it makes me want to watch "12 Monkeys" and "Gia" back to back, Cuban sandwich in hand. (Importer: Vineyard Brands)

2013 Waxwing Spring Hill Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir Rosé (\$23, 13.4%): From Karen and Chris London's site just west of Petaluma, this is versatile as can be, with a mint-leaf freshness, peach skin and bright raspberry. A lot of stuffing for a pink Pinot.

2013 Chateau du Donjon Minervois Rosé (\$17, 12.5%): This historic Languedoc property shows how tangy wine from southerly French climes can be. In part, thank mature vines - 55 years for the Cinsault, 35 for Grenache, plus some Syrah from younger plantings - for a fresh mandarin orange and cranberry aspect, and watermelon-like crispness. One for a proper nicoise salad. (Importer: Hand Picked Selections)

2013 Le P'tit Paysan Pierre's Pirouette San Benito County Rosé of Mourvedre (\$19, 13%): Ian Brand's Central Coast-focused label hits it again, with a wink at Bandol. (Extra credit if you know that San Benito is a secret Mourvedre stronghold.) Tangy and intense, with sweet plum and Meyer lemon, and a carrot-and-mint savory side. It would shine alongside a plate of ribs, although it's game for whatever you got.

2013 Chateau Revelette Coteaux d'Aix en Provence Rosé (\$16, 13%): German native Peter Fischer's organic estate exudes Provence's pink soul. This mix of Grenache, Cinsault, Syrah and Carignane from a 35-year-old vineyard is accented by celery seed, with white nectarine and Seville orange. Shows that full-bodied pleasure of the sunny south. (Importer: Langdon Shiverick)

2013 Chateau d'Or et des Gueules Les Cimels Costieres de Nimes Rosé (\$17, 12.5%): More quintessential Rhone pink, this time from Diane de Puymorin's organic property due west of Arles. A slightly unusual mix here, with direct-pressed Cinsault and Mourvedre composing most of it. There's an aloe-like coolness to the iced berry flavors, tarter than you might expect from Costieres but with a lot of stuffing. (Importer: Robert Kacher Selections)

On the table

As you would expect from this crew, there's not much they can't do. That means everything from a **grilled-cheese sandwich** to the quintessential seasonal **burger**. So, yes to **grilling** - from **pork chops** to **gai yang** to **eggplant**. Fish like **halibut**, **salmon** and **sea bass**, simply grilled or steamed in parchment with fresh summer vegetables.

Also: a great plate of **dan-dan noodles**, a clay pot of **shui zhu yu** (fish in chile oil), a plate of **duck larb**, a perfect **dosa** - because the ancillary beauty of these wines is their absolute love of the universe of Asian spice.

Mexican, too, from **Jalisco ceviche** to the **Mission burrito** you're toting to Dolores Park. Or a plate of **falafel** and **baba ghanoush**. Even an icy tray of crisp Tomales Bay **oysters**.

2. The Light Brigade

I know there's a tendency to spurn wines that walk with a light step. Please, do not shun this group. These are the wines for a long spell on the porch on a summer afternoon. When you want a quick glass with a light meal on one of those days when it's almost too hot to eat. (Scratch that: Never too hot to eat.)

These are, with a nod to our beery friends, session rosés.

To be fair, they overlap in many cases, with our Utility Players (see Page M6), but these are a bit lighter bodied and happy to meld quietly into the background. They want nothing more than to be enjoyed - which is all any wine can ask for.

2013 Birichino California Vin Gris (\$16, 13% alcohol): Alex Krause and John Locke have taken a step up with this latest edition of their pink, a mix that takes strides straight across the state: Grenache (Sierra, Santa Clara), Cinsault (Lodi), Mourvedre (San Benito's Topo Valley) and more. Ample weight from sweet berry and tangelo, with a mellow Grenache ripeness and wild-herb lift. That full-fleshed, mellow aspect of Grenache stands out.

2013 Proulx Willow Creek Farm Paso Robles Grenache Rosé (\$24, 12.4%): Kevin Riley and his wife, Genoa, run this small Westside label using vineyards planted on Genoa's family property. Their Grenache Rosé, blended with a bit of Syrah, Zinfandel and more, is just what it should be - bright and peachy, with a green-apple tang and sage-like nuance. More depth than their Mission Rosé (\$14, 13.2%) although they deserve a hat tip for giving props to one of California's historically important

grapes.

2013 Fox Run Vineyards Finger Lakes Rosé of Pinot Noir (\$15, 12%): Our sole East Coast contender. This established New York producer has made a name farther afield for its Riesling, but here's a perfect example of Pinot Noir in a cold spot, near Seneca Lake. Great raspberry, fig and chopped tarragon freshness - for that slight herbal tinge that lifts pink Pinot.

2013 Broadbent Vinho Verde Rosé (\$10, 10%): The best vintage in a while of this pink version of importer Bartholomew Broadbent's popular wine, made from the typical grab bag of Portuguese varieties (Borraçal, Espadeiro, etc.). Slightly fizzy and with a touch of sweet fruit, as it should be, with watermelon, wild strawberry and oregano. Like a great dry soda - with a kick. (Importer: Broadbent Selections)

2013 Vignerons de Cases de Pene Penya Cotes Catalanes Rosé (\$9, 13.5%): This quality-minded co-op in Roussillon, near France's border with Spain, finds the right all-purpose balance of mildness and cracked-pepper spice, with robust apricot and cherry. Grenache Noir, Grenache Gris and Syrah. (Importer: Hand Picked Selections)

On the table

The lighter body and relative delicacy in these wines commends them to meals that otherwise might be overpowered by a meatier wine. So, **summer salads** - anything from **quinoa** or **cucumber** to **green papaya**. **Vegetable panini**. **Cold pasta**. Even just fresh **summer corn** or **crudité**. If you're packing a **cold picnic**, these are your wines.

3. The Heavy Hitters

A quick word on terms: Let me not imply these wines are heavy-handed or overwhelming. What they are, per my pink-wine taxonomy, is intense. They have enough weight that you should save them for the main course - when large slabs of meat go on the grill; when the evening's chill comes and you want a bean stew.

So please, don't consider them more or less meaningful than our utility posse. These are a demonstration that volume, even when wearing pink, can be an important part of the wine spectrum - so long as it doesn't go beyond the bounds of good taste.

2013 Abacela Umpqua Valley Grenache Rosé (\$17, 13.5% alcohol): For the third year straight,

everyone will again be keeping up with the Joneses, as Hilda and Earl Jones have turned out another top-notch effort from their southern Oregon property. Grenache in its intense, tactile form: rose hip and cinnamon red hots, with deep cherry, apricot marmalade and a mineral bite.

2013 Pierre Boniface Les Rocailles Vin de Savoie Rosé (\$18, 12%): A surprising turn from the Boniface label, which has been taken over by two old friends, Guillaume Durand and Alban Thouroude. Gamay Noir from 20-year-old vines is the base, and banish any thoughts of Gamay, the grape of Beaujolais, as a wallflower. The full freshness of chopped herbs - winter savory, orris root, peppermint - with a sweet, almost pungent aspect, like tayberry jam and honeycomb. Gamay gone wild. (Importer: Hand Picked Selections)

2013 The Scholium Project Rhododactylos Bechtold Ranch California White (\$28, 14.16%): The "white" moniker technically fits, since Abe Schoener's exploration in Cinsault from one of California's oldest (and newly fashionable) vineyards is more like a Blanc de Noirs. The gutsiest side of pink - more onion skin, really - with a meaty quality, like the coppery tang of beef jerky, plus pear and dried raspberry.

2013 Dragonette Cellars Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara Rosé (\$22, 13.2%): Back to Happy Canyon, where the sun and gravelly soils of the Vogelzang site gave winemaker Brandon Sparks-Gillis plenty to work with. Mostly Grenache, with Mourvedre and Syrah, and it loads tons of fruit flavor - juicy huckleberry, plum and Korean melon - onto a relatively modest frame, ripeness-wise, with a pleasing oregano kick for balance.

2013 Stoller Family Dundee Hills Pinot Noir Rosé (\$20, 12.5%): It takes a lot for a Pinot to fit in this category, but winemaker Melissa Burr brings the same combination of polish and sweet intensity that she does to all the Stoller wines. Full of sweet strawberry and huckleberry, and a savory celery-seed and mineral side. A lot of grip. Robust and confident in its deep flavors.

2013 Donkey & Goat Isabel's Cuvee Mendocino Grenache Rosé (\$24, 13.7%): One of several pinkish wines made from the very old Grenache Gris vines found in Mendocino's Gibson Ranch. Jared and Tracey Brandt made half the batch pale, like white wine; the other half soaked for nearly two days to become robust. The result is deeply fruity - full of sweet berry ice and cherry candy, and an allium-like herbal bite (almost like scapes). Wine for ribs.

2013 Idlewild Gibson Ranch Mendocino County Grenache Gris (\$28, 12.9%): Sam Bilbro and his

family now own the historic Gibson Ranch property, and Sam and his wife, Jessica, make their own take on its Grenache Gris. Think of this more like a light red, with its crimson color, fermented on its skins. (As the name suggests, Grenache Gris is a pale-colored cultivar of Grenache.) The extracted tannins and red-wine grip are balanced by muddled plum and a buttermilk creaminess.

2013 Fiddlehead Cellars Pink Fiddle Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$22, 12.6%): Kathy Joseph directs fruit from her own Fiddlestix vineyard into this intense bottle. A dried-leaf complexity adds to the cherry and robust currant fruit - lots of color and extract, and almost a bit of heat on the finish.

2013 Lucy Santa Lucia Highlands Rosé of Pinot Noir (\$19, 14.1%): The Pisoni family's take on pink pushes boundaries, as their wines often do - there's a bit of lingering sweetness, a burliness for Pinot Noir. But also great acidity and mint-leaf freshness to balance hearty cherry and tangerine flavors. Drink it with cassoulet, straight into winter.

2013 Three Wine Co. Contra Costa County Carignane Rosé (\$16, 12.6%): Matt and Erin Cline have tapped into some of Contra Costa's bounty of old vines for their Clarksburg label. Carignane is rare fodder for pink wine, but this is complex and gutsy. A sweet cassis note almost goes too far, but there's poppy seed, a sawtooth-basil savory side and a lot of chewy tannin. Put blue cheese on those burgers.

2013 Chateau Lascaux Languedoc Rosé (\$17, 13.5%): A lesser known name in the Lynch book, but their rosé, a mix of organically farmed Cinsault, Syrah and Grenache grown on limestone, makes a strong case. More weight than you'd expect - the Languedoc muscle showing through - with big Rainier cherry, dried lime and hazelnut skin. (Importer: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant)

2013 Vaughn Duffy Sonoma County Rosé of Pinot Noir (\$18, 13.9%): Sonoma winemaker Matt Duffy's pink wine is back in super shape, and a bargain considering its Sonoma Pinot base. It's plusher and fruitier than in the past, full of brambly blackberry and peach, with a minty kick to finish.

On the table

Go big or go home. These are the wines for racks of **ribs**, for **barbecue sauce** with unapologetic heat. Pink wine with **flank steak**? You bet.

For that matter, if you want the full depths of **cassoulet**, or beautifully unctuous **chana dal**, or a pungent **lamb curry**, these are your wines. **Kielbasa** and **Sheboygan brats** straight off the grill. **Chicken molé**.

If you like your **salmon cedar-planked** or **smoked**, you've come to the right place.

4. White-Tablecloth Pink

Part of making rosé a fully respectable creature - pulling it out of the last dregs of the Mateus era - is to put it on the table as a noteworthy bit of finery. In its best examples, pink wine has a hint of the depth and structure you'd want in an exemplary red, along with the freshness and acidity of a white.

Just as the best modern cuisine often plays between worlds - sweet and savory, cooked and raw, austere and luxurious - these are wines that do the same.

2013 Red Car Sonoma Coast Rosé of Pinot Noir (\$20, 12.7% alcohol): Carroll Kemp's pink interpretation of the Sonoma coast is so thoughtful and nuanced that you can almost miss how totally delicious it is. Sourced mostly from the Sebastopol hills, it's delicately floral on one hand but showing full-force bright cherry-ice and mandarin fruit. Utterly suave.

2013 Turley Wine Cellars White Napa Valley Zinfandel (\$19, 11.9%): Christina Turley's grand restoration of white Zin's good name continues. This is the most robust of the three vintages of Turley White Zins, and the best yet. A blossom and sorrel-like freshness to the strawberry flavors, but a surprising grip to the texture - real color and tannin in there, like the best part of peach skin. One of the year's most serious, versatile pinks.

2013 Laurence Feraud Pink Pégau Vin de France (\$23, 12.5%): Any Chateaufeuf lover will know Laurence Feraud's legendary work at Domaine du Pegau. Now, from Chateau Pegau, a new property just outside the appellation, comes a rosé counterpart, all from old-vine Cinsault. It's direct pressed, with no malolactic process to soften it, which keeps it tangy and focused, all crushed lilac, redcurrant and sandalwood, with a welcome intensity. It is a perfect Nicoise salad wine, but also ready for far more refined fare. (Importer: Hand Picked Selections)

2013 J.K. Carriere Glass Willamette Valley White Pinot Noir (\$24, 12%): First, a minor quibble: "white" Pinot Noir is in fact a bit of a different creature - white wine made from red grapes, found both in Oregon and Italy. Glass has a slight salmon hue. It is also serious stuff indeed; mostly from the three-decade-old vines at cold Temperance Hill, one of Oregon's outstanding sites, fermented with indigenous yeast and aged in old barrels. It bursts with chive, rhubarb and cherry-ice aspects, the herbal side underscoring its deep flavors. No surprise that Jim Prosser's handiwork has been a perennial star in our pink lineup.

2013 Gaia Wines 14-18h Peloponnisos Agiorgitiko Rosé (\$16, 13%): From the St. George grape harvested on the slopes of Greece's Nemea, this is once again a superstar in the pink realm. Tangy and coppery, with plenty of time soaking on skins (the name refers to the duration) for a deep extract: lots of blood orange, clove, peppercorn and ripe cherry, with a good bit of tannin on the end. (Importer: Athenee Importers & Distributors)

On the table

If you're aiming for four-star cooking, whether it's **uni** or **braised sunchokes**, even your I-had-all-weekend-free attempt at the French Laundry's oysters and pearls, these are worthy companions.

It need not be white-tablecloth, either. These are bottles that will do great credit to great **omakase sushi**, especially as you transition from delicate to fattier fish. And, frankly, they'll do equally well with the simplest meals.

How rosé is made

By one of two methods, typically. The **direct-press** method is exactly what it sounds like: grapes picked specifically for pink wine, with the juice pressed soon after harvest, usually after soaking on the skins for no more than a day. (Soaking helps to give rosé its color and texture.) The key virtue of direct-pressed is that the grapes are specifically picked to make rosé.

Alternately, a winemaker can make a **saigné** - beginning with grapes meant for red wine, but bleeding off some of the juice soon after the grapes are crushed, which both yields light-colored juice and concentrates the remaining red-wine must.

In a few cases, winemakers may blend some white grapes in with red.

Serving rosé

In general, **any wine glass** will do just fine for rosé. The wines should be served **slightly chilled** - perhaps not as cold as white wine, but around 50 degrees. While they do not need to be decanted, since most are young decanting can help release their flavors. (As can a vigorous shake or two of a closed bottle.)

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