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Rosé wines: In the Pink

Fresh and food-friendly, today's wide array of rosés provide perfect summer sipping.

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It can be fresh and lively, or deep and structured.

It's a great match for every kind of food, from pad thai and wild-mushroom bruschetta to hot dogs and apple pie.

It makes Champagne absolutely rock, even for folks who've never met a bubbly that didn't prompt a splitting headache.

Only one problem: It's pink. And until very recently, for the vine-inclined, beverages of that hue were nonstarters.

Rosé was *outré*, eh?

Au contraire, mon ami.

Pink wines -- actually covering a surprisingly wide range of hues -- are bigger and better than ever. Made from all manner of grapes, and in both still and sparkling versions, rosés today are hotter than an August day in Provence, their spiritual home.

"Everybody's buying it," said Chuck Kanski, manager of Solo Vino in St. Paul. "It's retired guests who, when we ask them when's the last time they had rosé, say 20 years ago and it was Mateus. It's the younger crowd who have no fear. It's the softball-playing gentlemen. We've even had rosé geeks come here from Eden Prairie." Rosé geeks -- a phrase that would have been deemed oxymoronic in years past -- are part of the reason that U.S. sales of imported rosés have risen from 20 to 40 percent in each of the past three years. Imports of pink sparklers from the Champagne region have grown nearly 500 percent in the last decade, and rosé Champagne sales in America grew 32 percent last year.

In recent months, the genre's two foremost glossy magazines, Wine Spectator and Wine Enthusiast, had expansive cover packages on rosés. "Last summer," the Spectator noted, "rosé appreciation in the United States reached a critical mass."

Culinary compatibility

More than any other Twin Cities merchant, Kanski has pounced onto the rosé bandwagon. Solo Vino's midsection offers up scores of rosés wrought from dozens of grapes, from light and lively *vinho verde* to dark and dusky cabernet sauvignon.

"Previously we would take this cab lover and sell them something from southern France. That didn't work so well," said Kanski. "Now, when a cab lover comes in, we'll tell him 'the flavors you enjoy in that deep, rich cab are also present in this cabernet rosé.' So there is

a comfort level in the flavors that they're going to expect. Their palate will know this flavor profile."

Interestingly, no matter what flavors the primary grape brings to a bottle, the result is generally food-friendly. The wine's body, like its color, is the result of a process that involves removing the skins from red grapes after they are crushed but before they are fermented. The resulting juice provides some of the crispness and acidity of a white wine and a good bit of the depth and structure of a red. That makes these wines ideal for a warm evening: light but not wimpy, refreshing but a bit bracing.

Those attributes also contribute to rosé's affinity for all manner of victuals. The ideal matches are, as with most wines, the foods from the wine's home region: tapas with a Spanish *rosado*, rustic Provencal dishes with Tavel, etc. More important, rosés are a swell catch-all when friends sitting around a table order a wide array of dishes, whether they are earthy or fiery or savory.

Young and fun

So what took so long for rosé to catch on with Americans?

My theory: Unlike in Europe, where children often get a small glass of wine with dinner, we grow up drinking gobs of soda pop, Kool-Aid and other sugary confections. So it figures that our first forays into the wine world generally involve semi-sweet rosés (think Mateus, its oddly shaped bottle inevitably destined to become a candle-holder), white zins and other "blush" wines. And it makes perfect sense that, once we "graduate" to tannic reds and minerally whites, we look askance at the wines of our misspent youth.

Rosé's resurgence on these shores started with a trickle. A few years back, wine drinkers sought hot-weather alternatives to overly buttery chardonnays and overly sweet rieslings, gewürztraminers and white zins. Fortuitously, that was about the time that winemakers around the world, a surprising number of whom have a soft spot in their heart for rosés, started experimenting, most notably with different varietals and blends.

So what took Minnesotans so long to catch up?

Big surprise: I have a theory on that too. No, it's not (just) that we tend to lag a few years in arrears of the coasts when it comes to trends, but it does have a lot to do with geography.

Rosés for years have been most closely associated with two locales, Provence and Portugal, that also happen to be among Europe's two hottest winemaking regions. Light summer sippers are a natural fit in those climes. They're meant to be consumed young, and to be simply enjoyed more than deconstructed.

On these shores, rosés for several years have found more favor in California and the Southeast, locales with long and hot (or endless) summers. Last year, they were *the* quaffing beverages in New York and Chicago, Wine Spectator noted. Notice a pattern?

While this year's long stretch of warm weather has helped spike sales, local merchants agree, we still have a way to go. Last year I asked a waitress at the Twin Cities' most reputable seafood restaurant about getting a rosé, and she looked as though I had

requested an arsenic-and-tonic. Rosés were not among the 32 wine categories in a recent Surdyk's sales brochure, although a similar mailing from Haskell's did have a *rosado* from Spain on the cover.

At smaller stores such as Sutler, Sam's Wine Shop and Zipp's, and restaurants such as W.A. Frost, there's more of a predilection toward the pink stuff. Which just goes to prove that old saw:

If you wait around long enough, everything will come back into style.

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