

Tastings | *Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher*

For Valentine's Day, Think Pink

As Sales Bubble, We Try Rosé Champagne; A Heartfelt Choice

THIS YEAR, you have the chance to show your valentine that you are both romantic and hip. Here's the key: rosé Champagne.

We've been recommending rosé Champagne to lovers for years because its blushing color and complex, demure tastes are so very romantic. Suddenly, rosé Champagne has become very trendy. World-wide exports of rosé Champagne more than doubled from 2000 to 2005, according to the Office of Champagne, USA, to a new high. Imports of rosé Champagne into the U.S. also hit a record last year. In 2005, 6.35% of all Champagne imported into the U.S. was rosé, up from 1.81% in 1995. Numbers from ACNielsen are even more striking. Sales of rosé Champagne rose 13.5% by volume for the 52-week period ending on Nov. 18, 2006, while sales of all rosé sparkling wines rose by an even greater percentage: 24% by volume in the same period.

To be sure, there are many other fine wines for Valentine's Day. When it's right, there's no more romantic wine than red Burgundy. American Pinot Noir is a good bet, too, for the same reasons: It can be silky, with some sexy earthiness. And there's always Saint-Amour, from one of the villages of Beaujolais (the history of the name has nothing to do with love, but that will be our secret).

Something Very Special

But there is something very special about rosé Champagne—the real thing, from the Champagne district of France. And here's good news: The surge in interest in pink bubbly has led to more rosé Champagnes on shelves at better prices. When we first wrote about these wines eight years ago, they were generally rare and precious. Our best of tasting, both in 1999 and in 2003, was Louis Roederer Cristal Rosé, which then cost about \$300. In fact, most of our favorites were quite expensive. The big exception was Pommery, which then cost \$45 or less and was good enough to go bubble-to-bubble with the big boys.

When we went shopping for rosé Champagnes this year, we were surprised and pleased to find a far larger selection. In fact, there were so many that, for the first time, we were able to conduct an entire tasting of rosés that cost less than \$100. This eliminated some excellent pinks, such as the Cristal and Veuve Clicquot La Grande



Dame, but it still left us with plenty. While there are thousands of small Champagne producers, and many of them make a pink bubbly, we generally stuck to the names you're most likely

Rosé Champagne tends to pair well with food—especially romantic dinners, of course.

to see, such as Piper-Heidsieck and Moët. We did include just a few small-production wines, such as Camille Savès, whose regular Champagne is a long-time favorite. For this tasting, we included only real Champagne, which always makes a special statement for Valentine's Day, though more good pink bubblys are being made all over the world, including California.

While most still rosé wines are made by leaving the juice in contact with the red grape skins for a short time, most rosé Champagne is made by adding a little bit of red wine—Pinot Noir—to the cuvée. The colors run the gamut from light blush to red. Because rosé Champagne has a little more taste and body than regular Champagne, but the same mineral, acidic intensity, it's nicely complex and interesting, and tends to pair well with food—especially romantic dinners, of course.

We have returned from our blind tasting with good news: The average quality of the wines was excellent. Less than 6% of all Champagne is rosé and it's clear that winemakers make it with a great deal of care. Most of the wines were quite good, with beautiful bubbles, lovely color and mouth-watering acidity. Not only that, but the average price of our seven favorites was around \$50, which is a real bargain con-

The Dow Jones Rosé Champagne Index

In a blind tasting of rosé Champagnes that cost less than \$100, these were our favorites. All of them are best served chilled, but note how they change and become more interesting, if not quite as well-integrated, as they warm in your glass. These pair best with a kiss. All are Brut and all are non-vintage, except the Roederer.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE	PRICE	RATING	TASTERS' COMMENTS
Louis Roederer Vintage Rosé 2000	\$62.00	Very Good/Delicious	Best of tasting. Elegant and romantic, focused and pure, with beautifully integrated, toasty tastes and a fetching bit of creaminess on the finish.
Moët & Chandon Rosé Impérial	\$43.00	Very Good	Best value. Romantic, deep pink color. More red-berry tastes than most, but quite dry, with great acidity and just the right amount of fruit and mineral flavors.
Camille Savès (Grand Cru)	\$49.99	Very Good	Marvelous little bubbles and a classy, blush color. Dry, intense and quite elegant, with all the right tastes. Beautiful wine.
Gosset Grand Rosé NV	\$64.95	Very Good	Fine wine, with lemony acidity and real charm. Not as intense as some, but extremely drinkable.
Taittinger Prestige Rosé	\$59.95	Very Good	Great bubbles and a lovely, yeasty nose. Nicely austere, with brioche, lemon and minerals. Tastes expensive.
Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin	\$48.00	Very Good	Dottie called this "rose-petal bubbly" and said it reminded her of a garden party. It's complex and somewhat shy, comfortable and comforting. You could drink this all night.
Henriot	\$49.95	Good/Very Good	Refreshing and clean, with good minerals and focused tastes. Lighter than some, somewhat shy, but lovely.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores in New York. We paid \$64.95 for Roederer, \$39.95 for Moët and \$44.95 for Veuve Clicquot, but the prices shown appear to be more representative. Prices vary widely.

sidering the price of a dozen roses these days.

A Lack of Color

Our old favorite, Pommery, by the way, was good, but not among our favorites (it now costs around \$55). We also wish it had a bit more color. While we tend to prefer rosé Champagne with more of a blush than a true red color, this was far too pale as a Valentine's Day choice, especially since it costs about 50% more than regular Pommery. (Our first bottle was so light-colored that we bought a second, thinking perhaps there was some kind of labeling mistake, but the second had the same faint tint.)

Our best of tasting really put it all together. It was elegant and romantic, smooth yet intense, with well-integrated, pure tastes and a lovely, long-tasting finish. Darn if it didn't turn out to be Louis Roederer again—this time the 2000 vintage rosé,

which costs just a fraction of the Cristal's price.

With rosé Champagne all the rage, don't wait until the last minute to pick up a bottle. Get one today and start planning your Valentine's Day around it. This is a wine that, we promise, really is good for your heart.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. Look for our Wine Notes column in the Pursuits section of the Journal's Weekend Edition. Every Saturday, we answer questions from readers. You can contact us at wine@wsj.com.

Don't forget that Saturday, Feb. 24, is Open That Bottle Night 8, when all of us, world-wide, will finally drink that bottle of wine we've been saving too long for a special occasion that never comes. If you want to know more about OTBN, drop us a note and we'll send you our recent column.