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A Lighter Shade of Pinot

Terroir-Expressive Rosés

by David Schildknecht

Label any rosé "pinot noir" and a bit of that grape's mystique rubs off on it. But if you crave an intriguing wine that testifies to terroir, consider Sancerre. And don't expect "rosé" or "pinot" to be on its label.

"If we were going to make rosé, then it must be by consciously grooming the vines and pressing the fruit in search of white wine virtues: elegance, minerality and freshness."
— Ingrid Groiss

Pinot noir was established here well before the post-phylloxera incursion of sauvignon (which has a longer history, as "blanc fumé," across the river in Pouilly), and today most Sancerrois growers make rosé, if offhandedly. Grab a glass from Gérard Boulay, François or Pascal Cotat, Pascal Reverdy, Claude Riffault or Vacheron, though, and you'll experience not just consummate refreshment and fascinating complexity but also some shock—here it helps if your glass is jet black—that the contents, which you might well guess as Sancerre, aren't sauvignon but pinot noir.

Boulay's version, from ancient vines in a steep parcel near Chavignol's renowned Grande Côte, can serve as a template: seedy red berries, lime and fresh tomato flavors are strewn with herbs and laced with saliva-liberating salinity. This is, however, hardly the rosé of his countrymen's imagination. Comparing notes after cellar visits a decade ago, two US importers concluded that they must have been purchasing Boulay's whole production. "Thank goodness," observed Madame Boulay, "because the French don't order it."

Deep into the ancient province of Berry, forty miles from Sancerre, Reuilly shares both its famous cousin's dominance of sauvignon and a long history with pinot. With barely 350 vineyard acres, Reuilly renders rosés utterly unlike any others, not from pinot noir but from its purple-skinned mutation, pinot gris. That grape (rather than "rosé") is mentioned on labels of this salmon-colored genre; but Berry's presentation at the 1859 *Concours Régional d'Auxerre*—in which Reuillys far outnumbered Sancerres—featured a "vin rosé" among the former; and a menu saved by Camille Rousseau from Berry's pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exposition lists only three wines: "Blanc de Quincy," "Sancerre Sauvignon" and "Rosé de Reuilly." At the time, Reuilly had just acquired its AOC, but solely for sauvignon blanc, of which Rousseau's own vines were poised to deliver their first crop. Perhaps that meal in Paris inspired his subsequent planting of pinot gris (which, like pinot noir in Sancerre, would wait two decades for AOC recognition). His grandson Denis Jamain has elevated Reuilly pinot gris to fine art. Jamain maintains that Reuilly's dominant Kimmeridgian chalk is less suited to pinot than quartz- and silica-rich gravel nearer the river Cher. Nevertheless, chalk, salt, citrus and mouthwatering suggestions of herb-laced shellfish stock evoke Chablis. Although it often excels with a year in bottle, the 1,700 cases of Jamain's pinot gris sell out almost instantly—half destined for the US. New acreage, being propagated via *sélection massale,* won't come too soon.

Another aberrant pinot recently emerged in improbably resplendent rosé garb. The Mariafeld clone's loose, straggly clusters—anything but pine cone–shaped—render it scarcely recognizable as pinot. But loose clusters are its raison d'être, conferring rot resistance on this Swiss clone, designed for climes where ripeness might not arrive before the first snow. In 1968, Washington State viticultural pioneer Walter Clore convinced Charles Henderson to plant it at his Dragonfly Vineyard, perched 1,700 feet above the Columbia River, 25 miles south of perpetually snow-clad Mount Adams. Four decades later, Steven Thompson, fresh from a stint as Christophe Baron's right hand at Cayuse, was searching for a place to put down vine roots, fell in love with the Columbia Gorge, and jumped at the chance to lease (and rechristen) Dragonfly. "I thought to myself, 'There's no way those grapes will ever ripen enough in this site to produce a good red wine,'" recalls Thompson. So he set his sights on *méthode champenoise* (fortuitously, as it turned out), but determined to disgorge only when he, not the bank, said "It's time." Meanwhile, Thompson bottled most of his whole-cluster-pressed, barrel-fermented base wine as Atavus Vineyard Rosé. Now that half a dozen vintages can be surveyed, it's evident this silken, richly nutty wine delivers some

illustration by Vivian Ho

of the most ethereally floral and shimmeringly mineral nuances to which pinot can aspire, and also that it thrives with bottle age.

Long hang-time under cool conditions might also help explain the seemingly improbable success of Sommerwein, an ostensibly seasonal pinot noir rosé rendered by Ingrid Groiss in Austria's Weinviertel. An exclusively white-wine grower, Groiss had nevertheless been approached by her US importer for rosé. There were two parcels of pinot in Groiss's extended family, growing in a woodsy, cool sector within sight of the Czech frontier, so she thought, "Why not?" "But if we were going to do this," she explained, "then it must be by consciously grooming the vines and pressing the fruit in search of white wine virtues: elegance, minerality and freshness." She achieved that and much more—vividly fresh red-berry fruit, delicacy, mouthwatering salinity, invigoratingly radish-like bite—from a mid-October harvest, with some assist, she speculates, from highly calcareous soil.

That pink pinot noir can succeed in the grape's homeland, Burgundy, is demonstrated by Marsannay rosé, the 1919 brainchild of Joseph Clair that kept viticulture alive in his hometown during the ensuing precarious half century. Today, though, with Marsannay poised to proclaim premier cru status for reds of distinctive complexity, it's plain that Marsannay's rosés (unlike Sancerre's) offer only pale hints of their appellation's personality or potential, and some growers candidly admit to blending in chardonnay in an attempt to confer "minerality." Yet this Burgundian rosé remains one of many commercial success stories for pinot noir, while farther south, that grape's most famous offspring (the mainstay of Beaujolais) can make no such claim.

"It's not easy to make a good rosé from gamay, and it doesn't sell," insists Morgon veteran Jean Calot, echoing a familiar local refrain. But Christian Ducroux's Esquisse (like all his wines, *sans appellation*) demonstrates what can be accomplished. High above Regnié-Durette, with an uncommon northeasterly exposure, his horse-tilled gamay vines yield a near-weightless (10 to 11 percent alcohol), silken-textured, infectiously juicy meld of tart red berries, bittersweet, smoky nut oils, mysteriously musky bite of radish and mouthwatering salinity. And Jean-Claude Brun's brightly fruited Domaine des Terres Dorées Rosé d'Folie from the high, calcareous southern Beaujeu Hills has, within ten years, become a surprising best seller despite getting labeled as Beaujolais only since 2014. Could altitude be a key to rarified gamay rosé?

Steve Edmunds might say so. Best known for his work with Rhône grape varieties over the last three decades, Berkeley-based Edmunds was also inspired by some of Beaujolais's recent pioneers. So when El Dorado County viticulturist Ron Mansfield mentioned a 3,400-foot-high pear orchard whose owner, Bob Witters, was thinking of planting to vines, Edmunds suggested gamay. In 2000, this cool, volcanic clay-loam site hosted California's first fledgling gamay in a quarter century. The resulting Bone-Jolly Gamay Noir displayed an aromatic, tart-edged, salt-and-pepper-tinged riot of red fruits that suggested the secrets of gamay outside Beaujolais were being unlocked.

Still, Edmunds hoped for additional depth of flavor, structure and textural allure that he wasn't convinced mere vine age would confer. So when opportunity arose in 2005 to plant a marginally lower nearby site whose soil, like Beaujolais's, was decomposed granite, Edmunds unhesitatingly requested more gamay. But before the first crop could convince him that this new Barsotti Vineyard was his gamay gold strike, Edmunds had co-opted part of Witters for an experiment. "I discovered Jean-Paul Brun's Beaujolais rosé," he relates, "and it was like this light bulb went on in my head—why hadn't I already thought of that?" The result was like a light bulb in the mouth, and as Barsotti came into full production, Edmunds began devoting Witters (plus some rows at Barsotti) to rosé.

Two decades ago, rosé had fallen from fashion among Americans who considered themselves at all informed or sophisticated about wine. Today, knee-jerk rejection of rosé is recognized as ignorant color-prejudice, and the outlook for discoveries, as well as rediscoveries, looks rosy indeed. ■

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