Why Are the Best Rosé Wines Made in Provence?

By car, boat and bicycle, a writer explores its quintessential French vineyards to investigate.

By Claudine Ko

You've seen Provence in paintings. Majestic Montagne Sainte-Victoire brushed in deep greens by Cezanne. Scenes of the St.-Tropez seaside portrayed in muted blues and flaxen by Matisse and Signac. The artists were lured by the light, the landscapes and the slow, elegant lifestyle, just as my travel companion and I were when we arrived in mid-June. But we had one more source of inspiration: the region's renowned rosé wines.

Seated outside Le Bistroquet in Aix-en-Provence for our first proper meal, we rejoiced with forks of figs and goat cheese in one hand — and glasses of perfectly chilled rosé in the other. With a refreshing balance of dryness, fruit and acidity, the wine cut through both the creamy chèvre and the sultry late-spring night. We toasted to the pursuit of happiness and our Dionysian plans to linger over lunches featuring niçoise salads and the fromage of our dreams, float in cool translucent waters and experience why the rosés of Provence are the most celebrated by discerning wine drinkers around the world.

It all starts with terroir. Here, the diversity of soils and grapes — not to mention 300 days of sunshine each year — are ideally suited to high-quality rosé. So after spending the next day browsing the open-air markets along the grand, tree-lined Cours Mirabeau and touring modern sculptures installed across the sprawling grounds of a nearby château wine estate, we began our weeklong journey east, toward Nice. We stopped at all manner of châteaux, wineries and restaurants to taste the local rosés and discover what makes the Wines of Provence so exceptional.

VINS DE PROVENCE
le Goût du Style

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SHADES OF ROSÉ

In Provence, the oldest wine region in France, the ideal rosé is dry, aromatic and has a light tint of melon.

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THE DOMAINE LIFE

There are nearly 600 producers within the Wines of Provence consortium, comprised of both private wineries and cooperatives across the appellations of Côtes de Provence, Coteaux Varois en Provence and Coteaux d'Aix-en-Provence.

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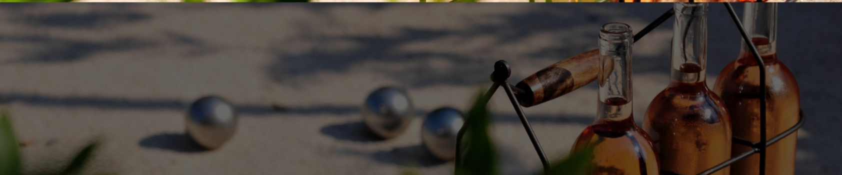
Provence is the oldest wine region in France, beginning 2,600 years ago when Greeks brought grapevine culture to what is now Marseille. The locals crushed red and white grapes, fermenting the juice in clay vessels, to create rosé. When the Romans settled in Provence in the second century B.C., they helped spread the demand for the wine by producing and distributing it throughout the region, which is still considered the heart of rosé-making today.

Rosé is made all over the world, in varying colors, quality and sweetness. But Provence is the only region in France to specialize in dry and aromatic rosé wines. These premium Wines of Provence are so technically challenging to produce that forward-thinking winemakers across the appellations of Côtes de Provence, Coteaux Varois en Provence and Coteaux d'Aix-en-Provence have invested in research, superior grapes, state-of-the-art equipment and tech innovation as part of their dedication to excellence. The resulting vintages are distinct, diverse and a striking reflection of the Provence climate and the wide variety of terroirs, ranging from soil veined with limestone in the west to volcanic rock and granite in the east.

The Wines of Provence commitment to sustainable agriculture, as well as the extraordinary precision of the local winemakers, also help create what many consider the finest wines in the world. The importance of that precision cannot be overstated.

"Rosé is fragile," says a winery manager located deep in the Var, where the mistral wind blows strong, keeping the vineyards dry (staving off pests and disease) while enabling cloudless, sunny skies. The grapes are harvested earlier in the season (than for red and white wines) and usually in the middle of the night, when it is coolest. Maintaining low temperatures during harvest, a short maceration and/or pressing (the pigment comes from skin contact), and fermentation are crucial for producing excellent, lively wines in a variety of exquisite tints. If you're up early enough to catch the sunrise over Montfort-sur-Argens, these same colors may softly envelope the sky: peach, melon, mango, pomelo, mandarin and red currant.

With a growing consumer appetite for organic wine, the winemakers of Provence are dedicated to an agroecological transition. They've set a goal to be 100 percent organic or High Environmental Value by 2030, with many already working toward biodynamic certification (a regenerative approach to agriculture). A veteran winemaker near Toulon tells us, "I'm not working for myself now, but for tomorrow and my children."



SUMMER PLAY

A refreshing glass of rosé pairs well with the slow, elegant lifestyle of Southeastern France, including the game of Pétanque. The rules were codified in Provence during the early 20th century; there is no running involved.

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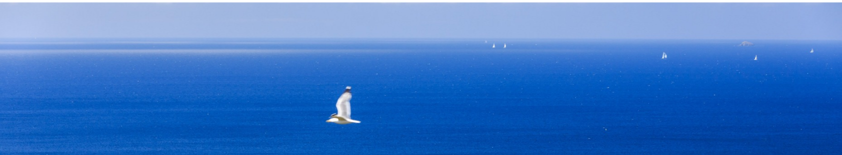
On the boat to Île de Porquerolles, the glitz of St.-Tropez shrinking in our wake, the scene was quintessential rosé, speeding over mesmerizing shades of aqueous blue reflecting a brilliant morning light. Once privately owned, much of the island is now a national park covered in the region's ubiquitous olive trees and fragrant fields of lavender, as well as grapevines for three wineries. In the spiking afternoon heat, we biked along dirt trails past walled vineyards and creeping bougainvillea before finding easy refuge under the shade of enormous pine trees, as well as a superb lunch. We paired the courses with local vintages redolent of pine and citrus, at which point, having traversed various terroirs, I began to truly understand the scope of Wines of Provence and the cultural dedication to enjoying an unhurried pace of life. Another bottle, aged underwater off the French coast, was exquisitely encrusted in marine growth; the result, a marvelously unique wine with elevated salinity. We could top the experience only with a glorious après-rosé swim.

In recent years, Hollywood celebrities and even luxury brands have bought vineyards in Provence, brightening the international spotlight on its wines. "Celebrities have helped elevate the reputation of rosé," says Eric Pastorino, president of the Wines of Provence, "but don't forget the real stars in Provence — the winemakers." There are nearly 600 producers within the Wines of Provence consortium, comprised of both private wineries and cooperatives, which allow small growers to share resources to help produce and distribute their wines.



SEASIDE SPLENDOR

Provence spans 125 miles across Southeastern France and includes the Var, Bouches-du-Rhône and part of the Alpes-Maritimes departments.

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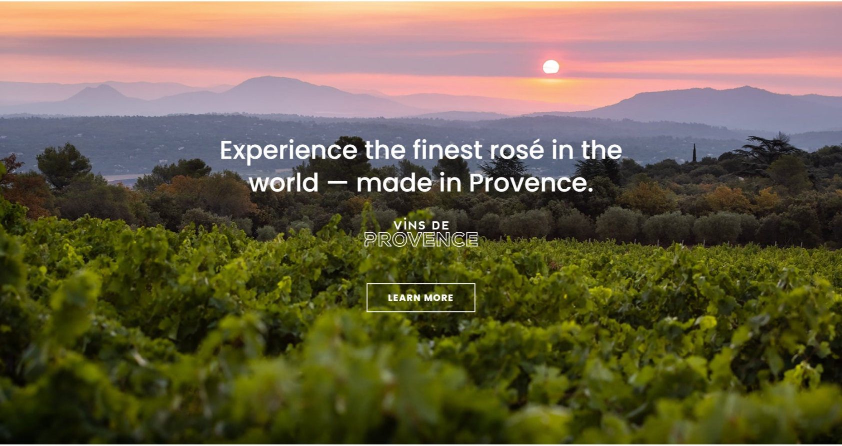
> *— Wines of Provence President Eric Pastorino*

Younger winemakers with an eye to the future are using their fresh perspectives to build on the passion and know-how of previous generations. “A new generation of winemakers has arrived, they studied abroad and were inspired by what they saw,” says a wine producer in Les Arcs, whose lavish wine estate can be rented out for weddings and other special events. “Selling wine was not enough.” They've created comprehensive experiences, where the persistent chorus of cicadas emanating across the grounds of 17th-century châteaux beckon, as do contemporary art, music performances, swimming pools, gorgeous accommodations and haute cuisine.

This kind of savoir-faire could happen only in Provence. So if you're on a quest for happiness, I highly recommend you heed this call.

Recommended wineries in Provence:

Château d'Astros – Amour
Château de Berne – Inspiration
Château de la Gaude – Hortense
Château d'Esclans – Châteaux d'Esclans Garrus Rosé from the makers of Whispering Angel
Château La Coste – Grand Vin Rosé
Château Miraval – Miraval Cotes de Provence
Château Sainte Roseline – Lampe de Méduse
Château Saint-Roux – Château Saint Roux Rosé
Commanderie de Peyrassol – Clos Peyrassol
Domaine de la Courtade – Les Terrasses de la Courtade
Domaine de la Grande Bauquière – Le Moment Suspendu
Domaine de Pey Blanc – Pey Blanc N1 Rosé
Domaine Fontainebleau – Louis Baptiste Rosé
Domaine Le Songe de Don Bosco – Amorevolezza
Estandon Cooperative in Provence – Estandon Héritage
Les Maîtres Vignerons de la Presqu'île de Saint-Tropez – Fleur de Mer
Torpez in Saint-Tropez – Bravade Rosé



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