Doug Hudson
4/4/2012

Rosé and Blush Wines

Before we get started, I'd like to thank Gordon Rouse for suggesting the idea for this tasting and Bob Parke for his suggestions and support.

If you attended any of my previous tasting sessions, you can guess what is going to happen next - you get to listen to me talk for a few minutes, before we get to the more entertaining part of the evening, the actual tasting. But in the case of rosé and blush wines, there isn't too much to say, so I'll try to keep it brief.

But before I start, I'd like to invite Bob Parke to share a few thoughts with us about rosé wines.
[Bob's comments here]

First of all, the topic is **Rosé and Blush** wines. Is there a difference, or are they really the same thing? Well, rosé essentially means "pink" in French - there isn't really a formal definition.

As far as I can tell, the term "blush" is an American term, and really just means the same as rosé - it essentially means "pink". I think the term "blush" tends to be applied more often to sweeter, fruitier pink wines, but they really mean the same thing.

So, what is there to say about pink wines? Pink wines are bit like Rodney Dangerfield - they get no respect. Even in places like France that are famous for making rosé wines, they get no respect. What is interesting to me is that pink wines are made all over the world, and really **nobody** takes them very seriously. Here's one indication – I went on the internet to look for books on rosé wines. I searched Amazon from one end to the other – know how many books I found on this topic? Precisely **one**. It's small, it's thin, the print is big . . . It seems like nobody has much to say about them.

What you do you know about pink wines? Do you know what percentage of wines world-wide are pink?

Neither do I - I don't think anybody does. Nobody measures pink wine production, as far as I could tell. I'd guess, though, that it's not more than about 5% or so; probably less than that. It's a lot smaller than either the white or red categories.

And how are pink wines made? We all know that white wines are made from white grapes, and red wines are made from red grapes. So it seems perfectly logical that pink wines should be made from . . . pink grapes! But no, that's not actually what happens (usually).

Or, remember back to grade school, and mixing colors? If you mix white and red, you of course get pink, so doesn't it make sense that pink wine is a blend of white and red wines? But no, that's not actually what happens, either (usually). That’s actually illegal in France (except in Champagne, apparently).

So how are pink wines made? Well, oddly enough, pink wines are actually made from red grapes, because in most cases, red grapes have red skins, but the insides are colorless. [Visual #1]

If you leave the skins in the fermentation, the colors, tannins, etc. are extracted from the skins, and go into the wine, making it red. If you remove the skins early in the process, after just a little of the color has been extracted, you get a "pink" wine. And this is part of why pink wines tend to be made all over the world, but in fairly small quantities. The French term is "saignée" - it's a technique for concentrating the colors and flavors of red wines that might otherwise be a bit light. Shortly after crush, a portion of the juice is bled off and fermented separately. Typically something like 10% to 20% of the total juice volume. The result is that the red wine batch has 100% of the skins, but only 80% of the juice, so the wine picks up more color and tannins. The bled-off portion is essentially a by-product, and comes out pink. Hence, lots of wineries around the world tend to produce relatively small amounts of pink wines, and tend to price them pretty reasonably, since their main focus tends to be the more "serious" red wines. At least one of the wines on tonight’s line-up is made this way.

But let’s get on to the meat of the evening – what are we going to taste tonight?

Well, we have a total of 8 wines lined up. I’d like to think they will go from the ridiculous to the sublime – I’ll let you form your own opinions.

First, we will taste a couple of mass-market rosé wines – these are wines that form many peoples’ first impressions of rosé –and perhaps not favorably.

Next, we have four different Rosé wines from France, including some fairly famous names - one from the Loire valley, one from Bordeaux, and two from the Rhone.

We visit Italy briefly to taste an interesting rosé from the far northern border, near Austria.

And we finish up in California, with a pink sparkling wine made in the Anderson Valley (just northwest of Sonoma) by a French Champagne house.

Rosé Wines – April 4, 2012

1. Mateus - Rosé (Portugal)

   For those of us of a certain age, this is a blast from the past - what most of us thought of as rosé back in the Sixties. The bottle shape is distinctive; the wine is quite sweet.

2. Sutter Home - White Zinfandel (California)

   Back in 1975, Sutter Home had a lot of Zinfandel, and they couldn't sell it all as a red wine, so much of it was made into rosé. That year, they had a stuck fermentation – the wine stuck with a lot of residual sugar. Rather than trying to restart fermentation, they decided to sell the wine as a sweet wine. Consumers loved it – White Zin has been a phenomenon ever since.

3. B&G (Barton & Guestier) - Rosé d'Anjou (France)

   Rosé d'Anjou is made around the town on Angers, in the middle Loire valley [Visual #2]. Traditionally it is made from a local red grape called Grolleau, but in recent years, several famous wine writers have criticized the Grolleau grape, encouraging local growers to switch to other, better-regarded varieties. This wine is 70% Grolleau and 30% Cabernet Franc.

4. Mouton Cadet - Rosé (France)

   Now we drop down to Bordeaux, a region better known for its red wines. But here, too, there are some pink wines produced. Mouton Cadet is the "junior" label of the family that owns the famous Chateau Mouton-Rothschild, one of the five "first-growth" vineyards of Bordeaux. This rosé is made from the same grape varieties normally used for red wines, and is a by-product of the *saignée* technique. According to information I found online, the rosé is about 65% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc, and 15% Cabernet Sauvignon – a fairly typical Bordeaux blend in terms of the grape varieties, but see how much difference it makes, to eliminate the skin contact during fermentation !!!

5. Chateau de Trinquevedel - Rosé of Tavel (France)

   The town of Tavel is located a few miles northwest of Avignon in the Rhone valley. Avignon, of course, is well-known as the home of the Popes during most of the 1300s, and its most famous wine is Chateauneuf du Pape, named after the Pope's castle, the ruins of which are still visible. The interesting thing about Tavel is that they produce virtually nothing but rosé wines.
   There is a legend about why Tavel produces so much rosé. Back in the Middle Ages, there was a King of France who had a country home in Tavel. This King didn't get along very well with the Pope at the time, who lived in nearby Avignon. The Pope was famously partial to the local red wines, so the King declared that he would drink only pink wines, as a sort of gesture of spite. There may be no truth to the legend, but to this day, the French wine regulations (AOC) for Tavel allow only pink wines to be made, with a minimum alcohol level of 11%.

6. Paul Jaboulet - Parallele 45 Rosé (France)

   Paul Jaboulet is a large wine shipper based in the Rhone. It owns some very famous vineyards producing great Rhone reds; the Parallele 45 wines are more affordable, everyday wines. Interestingly, the 45th parallel (latitude 45 N), which runs through the center of the Rhone region, is the same latitude we are at in Minnesota – the cities of St Paul and Minneapolis are very close to 45 N latitude. This wine is 50% Grenache, 35% Cinsault and 15% Syrah.

7. Alois Lageder - Lagrein Rosé (Italy)

   Now we jump over to far northern Italy, to the region of Trentino / Alto Adige (near the border with Austria) [Visual #3] and a rosé made from a red grape called Lagrein. Steve Kroll and I happened to taste this rosé at a dinner last year, and it struck me as pretty unusual, so I wanted to include it in this tasting.

8. Roederer Estates - Brut Rosé (California)

   Finally, we come back to California, and finish off with a pink "champagne" type of wine. Roederer is a French Champagne house (founded, oddly enough, in 1776), and they make sparkling wines in Mendocino County in California, just up the coast from Sonoma County. As an exception to most pink wines, pink Champagne from France tends to be not only rare, but also quite expensive. I couldn't find any for less than about $50/bottle, which was a little steep for me. But this wine is made in a French style, and gets pretty good reviews, for about $25/bottle. I made sure to have some extra bottles, so everyone should be able to get a good-sized sample. This wine is made, like French Champagne, from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes

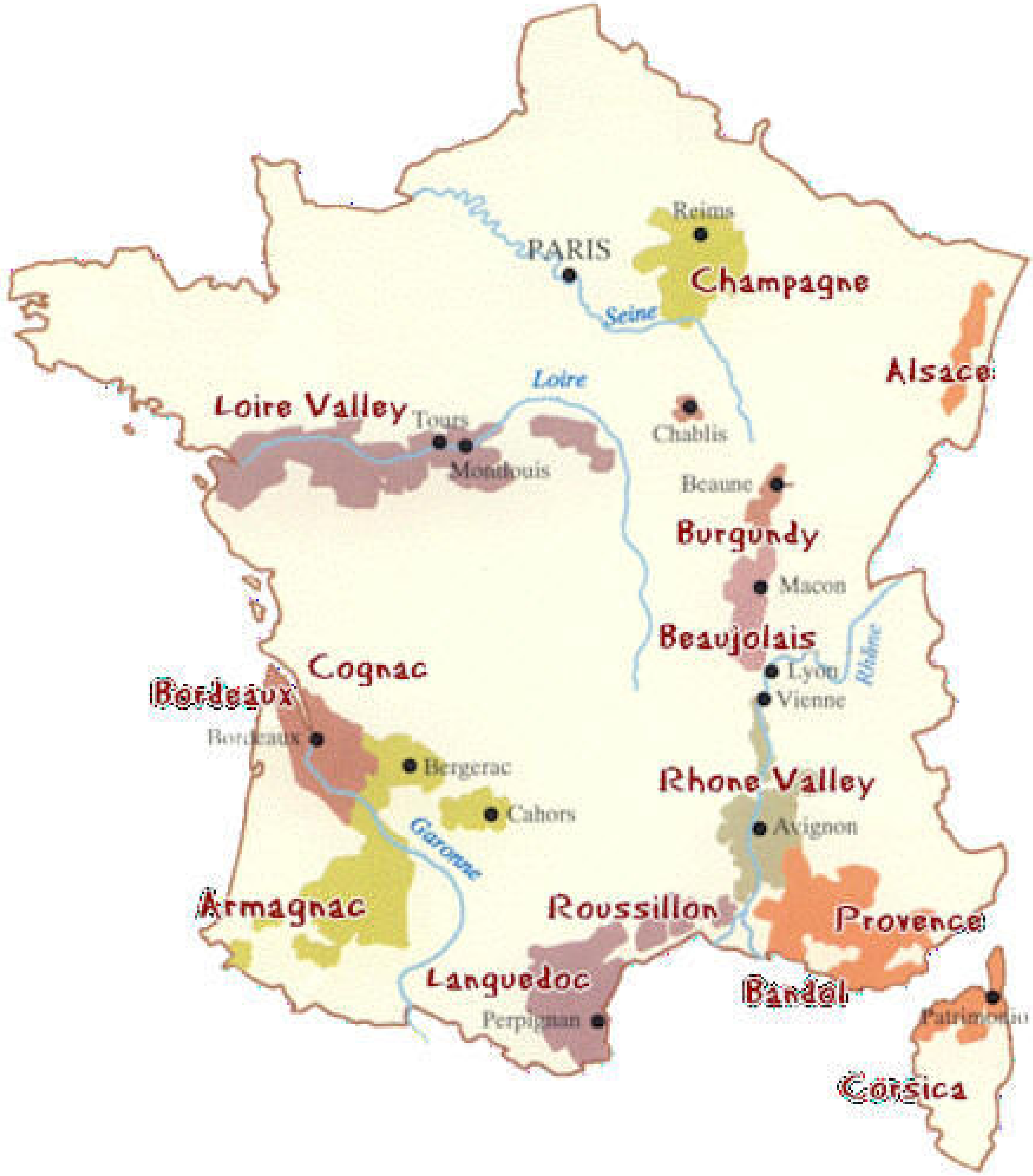
Now that you have tasted the whole range, I'd like you to think about where rosé wines come from (mostly red grapes) and consider the difference between wines made from those same grapes, but with more skin contact. Think about a claret from Bordeaux, then about the Mouton Cadet Rosé we tasted, for instance. That's a pretty dramatic demonstration of how much color, flavor, body ,etc. comes from the skins!

That's all we have for tonight, thank you for your patience. I hope that you have tasted some types of rosé wines you hadn't come across before, and maybe even found one or two you'd like to enjoy a few bottles of this summer. With spring coming so early, we have a nice, long rosé season ahead of us this year!

Visual #1 – Cross-Section of a red wine grape

(Note the lack of red color in the interior !)

Visual #2 – Map of France, showing major Wine Regions



Visual #3 Map of Italy, showing wine regions