

A Pink Tide

Recession? What recession? Provence rosé is one wine that's flowing more despite tough times

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Posted: January 11, 2010

Across France these days it's not difficult to find winemakers suffering from the latest chapter in their country's wine crisis—years of declining domestic consumption and now a global recession and a euro so pricey it's killing exports. Yet producers in Provence are experiencing a boom, all thanks to a class of wine that has often gotten little respect: rosé.

A new study by the Nielsen Company released by the Provence Wine Council shows a 28 percent jump in imported rosé sales in the United States in the past year—a category led by France (with 28 percent of the world's rosé production) and specifically, Provence. The growth in imported rosé sales is nearly eight times faster than the overall growth of wine sales in the U.S., and according to Nielsen, it's part of a trend that's been accelerating for the five years the company has measured rosé consumption.

"On the domestic side, rosés are down. The growth is specifically in imported rosés," said Danny Brager, vice president of Nielsen's Beverage Alcohol Team.

Overall, U.S. wine consumption continues to grow because "people see it as an affordable indulgence," said Brager. While some classes of wine are falling, especially wines priced over \$20, other varietal niches such as Malbecs and Rieslings are growing. Imported rosé is hitting a sweet spot of consumer trends: An increase in drinking moderately priced wines at \$10 to \$20, wine pairing with lighter world cuisines and a thirst for dry light wines.

What Brager calls "true rosé wines"—those generally made from red grape varietals that are pressed after enough skin-to-juice contact imparts a pale pink color— are dominated by imports representing only about 1 percent of the U.S. wine market. But this style of rosé— compared to sweeter pink wines such as white Zinfandel (a byproduct of red winemaking) and red-white blush blends—is steadily increasing in popularity not only in the U.S. but in Europe and fast-growing Asia.

The reasons for the surge are twofold, according to Francois Millo, director of the Provence Wine Council—the result of improvements in winemaking coupled with changes in lifestyles. Since the 1980s, across Provence there's been a general push to increase the quality and complexity of rosé. Vineyards are now managed to produce grapes ideal for rosé (typically from Grenache, Cinsault, Syrah and Mourvèdre) and direct pressing of grapes in modern bladder presses has for the most part replaced the *saignée* technique in which the light juice used for rosé is bled out of vats with the primary goal of concentrating color and aromas in the remaining red wine. Rosé is now the goal, not a byproduct.

At the same time, lighter Mediterranean-style cuisines and Asian influences have been a food-pairing advantage for rosé in France (where in the past two decades rosé consumption has doubled and shot ahead of white wine) as well as much of the wine drinking world. "In these new styles of cuisines from sushi to Latin American, rosé is the most adaptable," Millo said.



The recession has hurt most imported wines, but Provençal Rosés are doing well.

Kermit Lynch, the Berkeley-based wine importer and part-time Provence resident, has watched as over time rosé changed from an afterthought of many wine producers to a quaffable dry wine in its own right. "Now, some winemakers are choosing which grapes will go into a rosé instead of waiting to see which grapes are flawed and saying, 'We'll put them in our rosé,'" Lynch said.

Earlier this year, French wine producers and the Provence Wine Council fought off a [European Union proposal](#) that would have allowed European winemakers to blend white and red wines together and call them rosé, a practice now largely banned in most of Europe except for select wines such as Champagne, where it's traditional. French winemakers feared that allowing blending would encourage winemakers to mix unsold stocks of red and white wines and undermine the overall quality of rosé. Members of the Provence Wine Council now believe the fight may have helped rosé sales, by educating consumers on how rosé is made.

Served chilled, rosé remains a "relatively warm-weather wine," observed Sacha Lichine, the [Bordeaux-born winemaker and négociant](#), now in his fourth vintage since buying Provence's [Château d'Esclans](#) to make high-end rosés (priced from \$20 to more than \$100). But, Lichine added, rosé's season seems to be growing longer, and it's now even served in winter ski resorts.

"It's really women who are putting it on the map," Lichine said. "Women like it and the men, who no longer feel they have to beat their chests with bottles of big red wine, are getting into it."

The name perhaps most synonymous with Provence rosé is [Domaines Ott](#), an estate established in 1896 (in which the [Louis Roederer Group](#) now has controlling interest) that's been exporting wine to the U.S. since the 1930s. "It used to be that red and white were considered wines and rosé was something we didn't talk about as wine," said Jean François Ott, general director of Domaines Ott. "We have always made a lot of rosé and a little white and red. For a while—[the early part of the 20th century]—we were out of step with the market. Now we are in step."

The imprint of pink on Provence seems indelible, but that can have its downside—particularly for those committed to making Provence reds. In the South of France, one of the most visible red wine advocates has been tire store mogul Sylvain Massa, who planted the vineyards of Château La Font du Broc and invested millions to make what he boasted would be the "Pétrus of Provence."

While La Font du Broc still makes high-end, barrel-aged reds, mostly for sale in Côte d'Azur restaurants, in recent years the estate has shifted its efforts to increase rosé output. "Rosé has allowed Provence winemakers to keep their head above water, but when you try to sell red wine of Provence outside of Provence it is very difficult right now," said La Font du Broc's chief winemaker Gerald Rouby. "When you talk about Provence, people want rosé."

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