

# Rosé: Wines of Substance or Simply Pool Juice



The rosé wine category has been growing exponentially over the past several years. What was once a category defined by insipid White Zinfandels used as “transition wines” for those looking to “step up” from wine coolers, is now filled with an abundance of styles, many modelled after the region largely responsible for the category’s growth – the pale salmon coloured rosés of Provence. Quench approached two of the globe’s esteemed wine experts to consider the question. In traditional debate style, we assigned each of them the side they would argue in favour of – so, not necessarily a reflection of their personal opinion or point of view (although Elizabeth Gabay MW did literally write the book on the category).

**RESOLUTION: ROSÉ - THERE IS SUBSTANCE BEHIND THE GROWTH IN ROSÉ, IS IT NOT JUST HYPE AND THE CATEGORY DESERVES THE ATTENTION IT IS GETTING. IE. ROSÉ IS MORE THAN JUST POOL JUICE.**

And now to introduce the debaters:

**Elizabeth Gabay MW** grew up a Londoner but always travelled around Europe with her family. After back-packing around the world, Elizabeth returned to London where, by accident she fell into the wine trade when her parents bought a holiday cottage in Provence. Elizabeth passed the Master of Wine exam in 1998, and, in 2002, moved to a village an hour north of Nice. Her thirty years of working in Provence led in 2018 to her first book *Rosé, Understanding the Pink Wine Revolution*. With her son Ben Bernheim, they have put together an on-line *Buyers Guide to the Rosés of Southern France*, published in 2021. A new guide on the Rosés of Southern France, focusing on regional differences and old vintages is due to come out this summer.

Elizabeth recently released a natural rosé called Sen (Dream) made with Slovakian producer Vladimir Magula.

Elizabeth will argue in the affirmative supporting the resolution that there is substance behind the growth in rosé, and the category deserves the attention it is getting.

**Michael Apstein MD** has written about wine for over three decades. He received a James Beard Foundation Journalism Award in 2000 and was nominated again in 2004 and 2006. In 2008, he won the Les Grands Jours de Bourgogne Press Trophy and in 2010, he was nominated for the prestigious Cordon Bleu World Food Media Awards. Dr. Apstein is an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School and a member of the Division of Gastroenterology at the Beth

Israel Deaconess Medical Center. He lectures and writes frequently about wine and health and judges frequently at international and national wine competitions.

Michael will oppose the resolution and argue instead that rosé is predominantly an over-hyped category and wine lovers wouldn’t be missing much if the entire category disappeared.

Each of our debaters will have 1200 words to present their argument. There will be no rebuttal because this is print and we’re just having fun.

Quench readers will judge the quality of the evidence and arguments. Let us know who you think makes the best argument.

# The Rosé category is one of substance and deserving of the attention it is receiving.

By Elizabeth Gabay MW

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Like a reformed smoker, I am more passionate about rosé than most rosé drinkers.

I used to be dismissive, turned off by the marketing of drinking rosé by the pool or sea side and the image of the Mediterranean lifestyle (I live near the Mediterranean, after all). Rosés' big marketing success has indisputedly been due to being promoted as a simple uncomplicated wine that anyone can drink, the antithesis to wine snobbery.

The message is simple. Even if you know nothing about wine you can drink rosé! No worries about vintages - drink it within the year. No need to be a fancy cook, with complicated wine and food pairings - rosé goes with all food. Use the glasses you have - there are no special glasses. Just drink and enjoy rosé fresh from the fridge and even add ice.

This approach has both enraged wine snobs and, more significantly, kept rosés in a category of wines which are not worth considering. Wine merchants, wine writers and consumers condemn the banality of the style, bemoaning its success, yet happy to profit from its saleability. It's a Catch-22 dilemma: by keeping rosé accessible to a young and or inexperienced market, prices are kept low, which means that the vast majority of rosé wines tasted by most people will inevitably not be the most exciting of examples.

The popular image keeps rosé cheap, with a glass ceiling on the price. Many state that £/US\$15-20 is the maximum price for a rosé and would never try a rosé at a higher price point, thereby denying themselves the chance to taste or to see the potential of a rosé wine. When Chateau d'Esclans launched Garrus as the most expensive rosé in the world, it was its price, £80, that made it famous, rather than its quality, a situation unlikely to have raised an eyebrow for premium red and white wines.

Instead, the branding continues with the marketing hype of the colour pink (even Pantone has rosé wine shades) without looking at the style further. Rosé is undoubtedly pink, in shades from off-white to almost red but why should this make rosé lovers also wear pink? Why are so many commentaries of the style so focused on the colour and nothing else? Pink is perceived as the gateway to sales success, as seen in the introduction of Prosecco, retsina rosé, and the increasing number of pink gins. I have nothing against

## Rosé—why bother?

By Michael Apstein MD

Most rosé is innocuous, which explains its popularity.

I emphasize the word *most* in that sweeping statement and, of course, I am excluding rosé Champagne. Certainly, there is some high-quality still rosé on the market, such as those from Domaine Tempier or Château Pradeaux, to name just two. Indeed, the high-quality rosé category has grown over the years, as Elizabeth Gabay MW, will, I'm sure, point out as producers have moved away from the saignée method of making rosé. But fundamentally, rosé, as in "I'll have a glass of rosé," has replaced "I'll have a glass of Chardonnay" as shorthand for "I want a glass of wine—I don't care to know anything else about it" in North America.

Let me be clear, I don't have anything against rosé. In general, they are soundly made. However, when given the opportunity to drink rosé, I'd almost always prefer to drink something else—more on that later. So, in this debate, I'm not trying to bash rosé, I'm just attempting to explain why I think it's popular.

Wine is complicated. Rosé is not.

In a nutshell, that's why rosé is so popular. People want to drink wine because it's *au courant* and seems sophisticated, but most people don't want to expend the energy to learn about wine. Wine, in general, is complex and intimidating. Knowing about vintages, aging requirements, geographic names, producers, labels with foreign words are just a few of the things that make wine complicated. Ordering wine in a restaurant can be a nightmare. Is it from a good vintage? Is it ready to drink? Is it made by a good producer? Not to mention, how do you pronounce Vacqueryas? Most people are just not that interested in spending the requisite time to learn about wine, they simply want a "glass of wine." Enter rosé.

Rosé is simple. It's easy to order—I'll have a glaass of rosé. No vintages to worry about, and it's a word everyone can pronounce.

Assessing wine can be intimidating, and the reaction of people when you ask them what they think of a wine reminds me of seeing a deer in your headlights. It's odd that people should be frightened to assess a wine; people easily critique movies or restaurants, but they're scared to comment on wine for fear of "saying the wrong thing." People can't adequately articulate smells and tastes, so describing a wine is problematic for most. Furthermore, is that tannin-induced bitterness a good thing or a fault?



VS

these drinks if, and it is a big IF, it is not just colour but there is also a distinctive rosé fruit character. Regional wine styles which have moved from their own character to pale 'Provence style', contribute to a decline in the diversity of styles. Chiaretto di Bardolino and Bordeaux rosés being classic examples of wines which are going down the Provence-style path.

The problem comes back to colour. Always. Often, I've tasted rosé with professionals or consumers who cannot move from the colour question. But I would suggest that - while much rosé produced is merely a puff of pink hype - this wine style also has an intellectual and artistic beauty that is ignored by too many wine aficionados.

Stepping back from the focus on pinkness, seeing rosé as a wine reveals a different world. There are red flags - high yields, overly early harvesting, minimal skin-contact for minimal colour, and cold fermentation, which creates the palest of delicate rosés in a relatively uniform style.

Critics who condemn rosé as being all hype and no substance will often claim their preferred exceptions to be Tavel (appellation generically), Domaine Tempier from Bandol - always Tempier with no knowledge of other Bandol estates - Tondonia from Rioja, Garrus from Chateau d'Esclans in Provence and a range of oddments. Interestingly, these are all quite powerful rosés, many of which have been in oak, generally with ageing potential and mostly not pale. These critics do not limit their experience of an appellation's reds or whites to one wine before forming an assessment.

The hype around colour obfuscates the search for these more complex rosés. Try googling "interesting rosé", "complex rosé", "different rosé", "natural rosé", "darker rosé" - or any adjective other than "pale rosé." All largely give a similar listing of the same rosés which dominate the market. No wonder it is difficult to expand the market for more diverse styles.

It is important to define what a rosé is. If defined by colour alone - meaning the wine should be pink - many are so pale they could be defined as blanc de noir or white wine. At the other extreme, the copper onion-skin tones of some oaked or aged rosés closely resemble orange wines. And a few rosés are dark enough to appear a light red. L'Irréductible from Domaine de la Bégude in Bandol is dark cherry pink with lots of intense fruit, the complete antithesis of pale pink, but backed by the conviction of the winemaker that this is the best expression of Mourvedre rosé, succeeds.

My definition of rosé is based on two questions: Does the producer call it rosé? Is it made from a blend that includes red/black/gris grapes that do not finish fermentation in contact with their skins? (Rosé des Riceys is a prime example of a rosé which includes a partial fermentation on the skins).

Good winemakers of all styles of wine are a creative crowd. They are busy exploring the possibilities of rosé, by playing with varieties, site selection, harvest dates, length of maceration, indigenous yeast (or at least very neutral yeast), temperature, vessels, ageing

Enter rosé. It's simple to assess. The main criterion for its quality is color—and everyone can identify and describe colors. Moreover, the pretty pink against most any background makes it Instagram-ready.

In North America, much, perhaps most, wine is consumed as an aperitif, without food. That pattern of consumption requires a low-acid, round wine. The acidity in wine is critical to keep it fresh and lively through the entire meal. In contrast, without food, people gravitate to low acid wines that don't scratch the palate. These "aperitif wines" also need to lack power or concentration.

Enter rosé. It's simple to drink. Even if not subtly sweet, most rosés are round so there's none of the aggressive acidity to deal with. And rosé is the antithesis of power.

In short, rosé is popular because it is easy. It's easy to order. It's easy to drink. It's easy to assess. There are no bitter tannins, there's no mouth-cleansing acidity. Mostly, there's little taste, another plus for consumers who don't like strong flavors. Rosé is uncomplicated, unlike many wines.

An added attraction is that rosé is always served cold, and we Americans like cold drinks. A big complaint from Americans traveling to Europe in the summer is the lack of ice in drinks!

To me, rosé is akin to mindless television after a long, stressful day at work. Sometimes you just don't want to think—you want to relax. Rosé is perfect in that setting because it doesn't require any effort. Rosé provides everything consumers love about wine: social lubrication, the alcohol-induced buzz, and the relaxation it induces. All without straining the brain.

Now, when I say why bother with rosé, I'm speaking to the small, but ever-increasing, fraction of wine drinkers who enjoy wine for everything it has to offer—its complexities, its subtleties, its history, its story, its expressiveness, and how it changes with age or even in an hour as it sits in the glass.

Those captivated by wine love its near magical qualities, like the magic of terroir—why do two wines made from the same grape by the same winemaker taste different? Why does Tempranillo taste so different when planted in the Rioja compared to Ribera del Duero? What accounts for the flavor development as it sits in the glass or rests in the cellar? Fruity flavors morph into something else—earthy or leafy ones. Call them what you like, but where did they come from? I'm not speaking only of rarified Bordeaux, or Premier, or Grand Cru Burgundy.

The same magic is true for Muscadet or Beaujolais, not prestigious appellations by any stretch. The variation of Muscadet depending on locale, Clisson versus Le Pallet, for example, is extraordinary. The range of the variation is equally dramatic in Beaujolais. Wines from each of the ten *crus* made by the same producer are unique because of where the Gamay grape was grown. Even within a single *cru*, wines from the different *lieux-dits* of Moulin-à-Vent that Château des Jacques or Château des Moulin-à-Vent bottle are unique. But appreciating those magical qualities takes effort



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on lees, aged rosés. Cirque de Grives from Chateau la Gordonne in Provence, a non-oaked premium rosé fermented in concrete eggs, is powerful, intense, extracted, and extremely well made, full of ripe fruit and vibrant acidity. Pinot Grigio ramato, with its copper pink colour, can have texture and complexity but is accredited with orange wine trendiness while wines labelled Pinot Grigio Blush are relegated to being rosé. The off-dry rosés of Anjou are damned for the twin horrors of being pink and sweet, ignoring amazing examples of finely balanced fruit, sugar and acidity and their excellent food pairing ability. Producers struggle knowing that those who dismiss their rosés are quick to praise their sweet Coteaux du Layon.

Start exploring rosé like this and there is a world of exceptional wines worthy of hype.

This is where I find rosé really exciting. The sense of exploration and discovery. The more rosé is dismissed as over-hyped with no substance, the more I am delighted to discover a wine which intrigues and surprises. Not all of the experiments work, and they are far from rivalling the grand crus of the world, but there is something vibrantly exciting about the exploration of a wine style no one else is considering, of being made to think how a wine is defined.

The 'hype' may be nothing more than a successful marketing campaign which created and fed into a fashion trend, but it would not have succeeded without the quality of wine behind it. Is there substance and validity to the category? Definitely! Those who dismiss rosé based on their marketing image need to see rosé not through pink tinted glasses, but with the eyes of a wine lover, and explore beyond the obvious. Rosé is more than just a wine with too much marketing.

and study. Most people who drink wine don't want to make that investment. They just want a glass of wine. I get it. Enter rosé.

Certainly, on a hot day in the sun-drenched south of France a cool rosé is a welcome addition to a salad Niçoise. And sometimes, as noted West Coast wine writer Blake Gray points out, even wine enthusiasts occasionally want an "uncomplicated" wine—a rosé—when having BBQ in the summer. I understand that, but I argue that there are a bunch of other wines that are far more interesting and deliver more character than rosé. How about chilling a light red, such as a simple Beaujolais or Beaujolais-Villages (wines from the *crus* don't take a chill so well)? How about a Valpolicella or Bardolino, or a Côtes du Ventoux? Why not a Côtes du Rhone or a light Barbera from Piedmont?

And what's wrong with white wines? How about a Pinot de Picpoul? Possibly a Vermentino from Sardinia or from Liguria? There are also a bevy of Greek whites, such as Assyrtiko, Malagouzia, or Moschofilero that will do the trick, as well as an Albariño from Rías Baixas or a Verdejo from Rueda. Maybe take a look at a German Kabinett from the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer. As a group, these are all refreshing wines that deliver more pleasure than a rosé whether enjoyed at the table or as a stand-alone aperitive.

True, you need to have spent some energy to learn about these hard-to-pronounce, less well-known grapes or areas, which is why, "I'll have a glass of rosé" is so popular.