
CULT OF TASTE

A LIGHTER SHADE OF PINK

It's not white and it's not red, but it's the natural choice for summer on the East End.

BY E.L. WYVES



Last October, when Christopher Tracey and Larry Perrine went to collect the grapes they were planning to use to make their rosé, they didn't expect that creating such a laid-back sort of wine would involve so much urgency. "When you took the berries and squeezed them with your hand, color dripped out," said Perrine, owner of Channing Daughters Winery in Bridgehampton. "The red color was everywhere." The historic rainfall event had caused the thin layer of skin stretched around the ripe fruit to rupture, and the clock was ticking. If the juice absorbed too much of the color and other characteristics from the skin, the rosé would be too dark, too rich, too alcoholic. Its lightness, fruitiness and refreshing nature could be overwhelmed. The two rushed the grapes to their winery and pressed the whole clusters—grapes, stems and all—immediately. "We knew that if we left them overnight, we'd end up with red wine."

Such is the fine line that rosé treads. Misunderstood, underappreciated, and slightly schizophrenic, it's not red and not white. It's not serious, but not completely frivolous. Although the super-sweet rosés of California have pigeonholed the New World blush as a joke, the Old World uses of the wine were pragmatic. According to Matt Kramer of *Wine Spectator*, rosé is, in many ways, the first wine, enjoyed by the Greeks, Romans, and most Europeans until the 1600s when large fermenting vats first became common and allowed the prolonged contact of skins and juice necessary for making darker red wine. Since then, the proliferation of darker wines might have numbed our collective palates to the subtleties of low-wattage rosé, as Kramer calls it.

But this lightness has advantages. Served chilled and containing less alcohol than other wines, rosé sates people at lunch and dinner through-



Above: Channing Daughters' merlot, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon rosés range in color, aroma, and flavor. **Next Page:** Bucket of grapes destined for pinkness.

out the hot Mediterranean summers. There, its purpose is more hydration than the typical wine, and it also happens to pair nicely with fresh seafood and summer veggies served in oceanside towns. Sound familiar? On a good day, the East End masquerades as the Provence of New York City. Perhaps this is why our fairly young and small East End wine region has begun to yield a wide range of rosés—dry to slightly sweet, richly red to slightly salmon, cranberry-flavored to slatey—using a handful of different grape varieties and rosé blending techniques.

In the case of Channing Daughters, the result was a rainbow of three rosés, each made from a single variety of grapes from a single North Fork estate with three-year old vines: too young to have the tannins, flavors, and complexity of great red wine, but perfect for making rosé.

These *tre rosati*, as the Italianate winery calls its rosé triumvirate, became a sort of microcosm of the spectrum of rosés now produced on Long Island.

Rosés have not been as common on the Island until recently. Many wineries didn't have sufficient production to make a rosé wine, choosing to focus on merlots or chardonnays. And the demand wasn't necessarily there either. "More people drinking wine means more people drinking rosé, because it's typically easy to drink for beginners," said Lenn Thompson, a wine blogger who covers the East End for Appellation America.

In this sense, rosé can be a gateway wine, not just for people reared on soda pop, but also for drinkers who favor white or red and shy from

TINTING YOUR MEAL

The ambiguous nature of rosé makes it among the most versatile of food wines, matching with spicy hors d'oeuvres, salads, seafood, and even Thanksgiving turkey. In *Wine Style: Using Your Senses to Explore and Enjoy Wine*, Mary Ewing-Mulligan and Ed McCarthy suggest that sweeter rosés go well with a list of suspiciously unsophisticated foods, including cold cuts, cobb salad, chicken or tuna salad, potato salad, stuffed potato skins, hot dogs with relish, turkey burgers with ketchup, spicy chicken wings, sweet-and-sour chicken, barbecue that's slightly sweet, and ham with pineapple. In contrast, dry rosés are meant for tomatoes with basil and mozzarella, a delicately flavored omelet and Canadian bacon, *tortilla española*, quiche, turkey hash, pork chops, grilled veal paillard topped with arugula and tomatoes, and rare tuna burgers or tuna tartare.

At the Plaza Café in Southampton, chef-owner Douglas Gulija is pouring two of the Channing rosés as a flight as part of his all-American wine list. "Rosés have always been frowned upon by most people as a candy, tutti-frutti type wine," he said. "From the food angle, I love them. Because when get into the summer months, you get into a lot more cold preparations. Cold and spicy. Rosé is a great way to start your meal." He is recommending the Channing merlot rosé with his Long Island duck and shitake spring roll with a papaya and peach sauce garnished with hot mustard oil, and for the Channing cabernet sauvignon rosé his ratatouilles of local vegetables placed between two slices of lamb, ravioli-style. And the Frisky Oyster in Greenport owner, Dennis McDermott—a self-described rosé nut—is offering, for the second year, two flights of three rosés (one international and the other from Channing Daughters), as well as another six rosés by the glass and another nine by the bottle. "You put one next to the other and you can really see the different color characteristics and flavors," he said, noting that rosé is often an afterthought on wine lists even though it goes perfectly with gazpacho, figs and other summer fare. "People really underestimate the power of rosés. Not that I'm on a one-man mission to educate the world about rosés." What he likes best is its element of surprise. "Chardonnay is chard. You're going to get an oakey chard or a stainless chard. There's only a certain range of flavor. But when you go to a rosé, even a varietal rosé, you're not really sure what you're going to get. I find it very refreshing. Literally and psychologically."



unfamiliar territory. Well-made rosé combines the complexity and structure of red wine with the refreshing, thirst quenching qualities of whites.

Thompson recently tasted most of the Island's available rosés and found that they were "all over the place stylewise, but that's not shocking given the varieties." Cabernet franc, merlot and cabernet sauvignon dominate, and wineries sometimes blend the three. (Some also blend in a bit of white wine, a traditional technique for adding some zing that has gotten a bad rap due to inappropriate use.) Thompson found that the color was much deeper and darker this year, as were the flavors (also a great sign for the 2005 red vintage). "The complexity of the 2005 vintage is really endearing," he said. "These are not rosés for people who are looking for light wines."

But color isn't the only things that matters. "There are some very, very good rosés made here," said Jacques Franey of Domaine Wines & Spirits on Pantigo Road in East Hampton, which offers three dozen rosés from here and around the world. "And there are also a bunch of sweet ones made here that aren't worth exploring." Franey has been impressed by this new vintage, which he calls "the first year that I've seen rosés that really hit the mark." Some remind him of top Chinon-style French rosés. "They have complexity. They are very aromatic and not just the typical fruit flavors. There are all kinds of other things going on. All sorts of spice and herb and mineral flavors. Even steeliness." He thinks the East End could be a great rosé region, although he's not sure when he'll be able to charge \$32.99 a bottle—the going price for



Domaine Ott, a famous rosé from Provence.

“One thing about North Fork rosés is you don’t have the varietals that they have in the south of France that give the floral violets and white peppers,” said Gary Madden, general manager of Lieb Cellars in Cutchogue, referring specifically to the 2005 Bridge Lane Rosé. “What we achieved was just like at the Mattituck strawberry festival. The nose makes you salivate, but it’s totally dry in the finish.” Madden thinks this style might actually be more attractive to people who are used to “the Robert Parker, fruit-forward Napa Valley type of wines.”

Some winemakers admitted that the clientele actually expects a sweeter, blush or white Zinfandel style rosé, and they accommodate at the risk of creating a wine that is cloying and lacks balance.

Perhaps the most prominent rosé produced on Long Island is Wölffer Estate of Sagaponack’s completely dry offering. Between here and New York City, it makes regular appearances at beach parties and top restaurants. Winemaker Roman Roth said that what divides his rosé from the pack is not just its zero grams of sugar—an attribute that connoisseurs of French and Italian rosés favor—but also because “I deliberately pick the vineyard to make rosé.” In other words, like when making a red wine, Roth picks the grapes and presses them in a tank, allowing them to stay in contact with the grape skins. But this red-wine process lasts just a few hours or days, after which the juice is removed from contact with the skin, transferred to a steel tank and treated like white wine. This is the technique followed by Channing Daughters, Lieb, and a few other wineries.

In contrast, the majority of East End vintners make rosé by “bleeding

off” some juice from a batch intended for red wine. This is an old technique—known as *saignee*, from the French—that helps to concentrate red wine in regions or years in which the grapes are not as ripe as desired. (By removing some juice shortly after press, the remaining juice has a higher skin-to-juice ratio.) This sounds pretty much like the same technique that Roth uses even though he’s using all the juice for rosé. But of course the intentions are wildly different.

“By bleeding, you might make a more concentrated red, but the rosé juice you get is flat and flabby,” said Roth. The grapes used in bleeding off are likely to be harvested later, since the goal for red wine is ripe grapes. But really ripe grapes don’t necessarily have the delicate touch for rosé. “The ripening curve is an up and down curve,” said Roth. “Fresh and vibrant on the greener side. Subtle and soft and even flabby on the over-ripe side. We pick the rosé grapes early, on the up side. In the end it’s about harmony and freshness, rather than a byproduct or an afterthought and a garbage can.”

Picking early also translates into lower sugar levels in the grapes and lower alcohol levels in the rosé—11 percent alcohol for rosé compared with 12 or 13 percent for typical whites and reds. (It’s a small difference, but key if you are enjoying rosé on a sweltering day or hoping to go back to work after a rosé-lubricated lunch.) At Shinn Estate Vineyards on the North Fork, they grow a French cutting of merlot specifically for rosé production. “It always shows strawberry, raspberry and watermelon fruit components while holding on to just enough acidity to carry it through,” said owner David Page. Page plants this lot more densely, harvests about two weeks earlier, and macerates for just 8 to 12 hours before pressing.

In contrast to such dedicated lots, at Comtesse Thérèse in Aquebogue, the main purpose of the rosé is to help concentrate the winery’s remaining red grape juice. “I’m a firm believer in bleeding off,” said owner and winemaker Theresa Dilworth. For many East End vineyards with limited grape production, such saignée rosés are an economical way to gain an additional product line for curious customers.

For instance, Paumanok Vineyards in Aquebogue, which makes a semi-sweet rosé to compliment a suite of completely dry wines, didn’t make a 2005 rosé since all of its cabernet and merlot grapes ripened so thoroughly. “It fills a hole for a small, estate winery and helps with managing vintage variation,” said Kareem Massoud, who makes the wine with his father Charles. “It’s not propaganda. It’s true. If the grapes are not as ripe as you like them to make a red wine, it’s often very well suited to make a rosé.”

At Raphael in Cutchogue, the rosé is actually called Saignee, but that doesn’t mean winemaker Richard Olson-Harbich favors this method exclusively. In some years, he harvests grapes early for rosé, but also to give the fruitless vines extra time to store up energy for winter. In other years, he bleeds off in order to concentrate the juice for the big, fruity red wines that are Raphael’s focus. Last year, the grapes were so ripe that even the bleed off would be too red, so he made his saignée from early-ripening varieties that were crushed completely. “You need a holistic approach in which bleeding off or choosing grapes for rosés is part of the larger management of the vineyard’s red grapes,” he said, although he thinks talking too much about it misses the point. “It’s not supposed to be a complicated wine. The end result should give the impression of not working very hard.” □