

Why Napa's unusual, expensive rosés sell out 'instantaneously'

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Rosés made from Bordeaux grape varieties are unusual and trending in Napa. They're also expensive.
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

In the past decade, rosé has undergone an astonishing transformation from your mom's sickly-sweet white Zinfandel to the Millennial generation's signature summer sipper. But as "rosé all day" mania gears up for another pink-washed summer, Napa Valley winemakers say it's time for another metamorphosis.

They're pioneering rosé's premiumization era, one that they hope will push consumers to take the pink wine category more seriously. Instead of the customary Pinot Noir, or Grenache, which is widely used in the delicate, salmon-colored Provencal rosés of southern France, Napa wineries are turning to the same Bordeaux grape varieties — like Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot — that they put in their pricey, world-renowned red wines. They're often sourcing from choice vineyard sites; incorporating oak aging and blending techniques to add extra complexity; and bottling under cork instead of the customary screw cap.

The message out of Napa is clear: Just as Champagne doesn't need to be reserved for New Year's Eve and special occasions, rosé doesn't have to be pigeonholed as a summer party beverage. It belongs at the dinner table year-round alongside \$200 Napa Valley Cabernets — that is, if you're willing to trade up in price.

"There's a lot of thought now behind making rosés," said Laura Díaz Muñoz, winemaker at St. Helena's Ehlers Estate. She produces a \$38 rosé from Cabernet Sauvignon, plus small amounts of Cabernet Franc and Malbec from the winery's estate.

"It's richer, more elegant and not a fruit bomb," she continued. "It has a nice texture, and the mouthfeel is very pleasant."



A variety of rosé wines made with Bordeaux grape varieties. Winemakers hope these bottlings will get consumers to take rosé more seriously.
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

On paper, Bordeaux grape varieties seem like an odd choice for a rosé. These grapes are known for their power, tannin and structure — the complete opposite of what consumers are looking for in a rosé. But for Napa Valley producers, the decision is obvious: It's what they grow there.

"We're a Cabernet house, so let's not do a Provencal (rosé)," said Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker at Napa's Chimney Rock Winery, which has produced a Cabernet Franc rosé (\$45) since 1999. "It's got a little cult following because it's unusual."

As expected from rosé, these bottlings are typically bright, fruity and refreshing. But many have more depth and elegance than most rosés and a higher alcohol content, often around 13% or 14%. Some even have a slightly heavier body with perceptible — yet not overbearing — tannin and structure. While they can be sipped on their own poolside, they're even better with food.

"It's versatile," said Vianna of Chimney Rock's rosé. "It can handle some heavier meals."

There's just one problem: The economics don't seem to pencil out.

The high price of Napa's red wines directly correlates with the increasingly high cost of the grapes and farming. So, how can wineries use those same grapes for a rosé that sells for a fraction of the price?

For starters, they price them higher. Most rosés fall under \$20, but Napa's Bordeaux rosés typically sell for \$35 and up; St. Helena's Alpha Omega sells its Rosé Reserve, made from all five red Bordeaux varieties, for \$86. "I approach our rosé like I'm making one of my red wines; it's not an afterthought," said winemaker Jeff Cole, who crafts a rosé of Merlot for Sullivan Rutherford Estate that "sells out instantaneously," despite the \$54 price tag.

"I think it rises above a lot of the stuff that's out there," he said. "The overall quality is higher, so we can charge a little bit more."

But this pricing structure alone doesn't net a profit, which is why some Napa wineries produce their rosé using a method called saignée, which means "to bleed" in French. It's common for winemakers to remove a small portion of fermenting red wine from a tank to increase concentration in the final product. But instead of discarding it, they've discovered they can use it to make rosé. "It's an opportunity to recoup some costs, or make a little money," said Cole.

Yet most Napa winemakers The Chronicle interviewed make rosé using what's called the "direct-press" method, widely considered to make a superior rosé. (Cole prefers direct-press because he feels that saignée rosés are heavier-bodied with lower acidity.) It involves processing red grapes like a white wine; the grapes are pressed off of their skins — typically within a few hours to generate a light pink color — and then that juice ferments to become rosé.

Direct-press uses pricey red grapes, so in order to cut costs, winemakers often seek vines that aren't performing to the standards of their top-tier bottlings. Grapes for rosé don't need to be as ripe as grapes for red wines, and they're harvested earlier at lower sugar levels. The grape's acid — that signature, thirst-quenching quality of rosé — is higher when you pick earlier.

Taylor Berkley Boydston, winemaker and owner of T. Berkley wines in Calistoga, made his first Cabernet Franc rosé when a batch of grapes had red blotch, a common disease that can prevent a grape's sugar levels from rising and color from developing — neither of which are a major issue when it comes to rosé. At Ehlers Estate, Muñoz utilizes the first crop from new vines, as it takes several years for new plantings to reach full maturity and produce high-quality red grapes.

Cole picks Merlot for his rosé from a block on the estate that's cooler than the rest. "There's always a small percentage of the land that's not conducive to the top quality," said Cole. This particular block has higher levels of acidity due to the cooler temperatures but doesn't get enough concentration for his red wine program.

"For rosé, it's perfect," he said.

Most producers The Chronicle interviewed make a small amount of rosé, often only a few hundred cases, and use it as a refreshing kickoff to their tastings, which typically consist of big, heavy reds. They sell it directly through the winery, so it's best to shop through their website or at the tasting room. The wines sell out quickly upon release each spring — compared to a \$150 bottle of Cabernet, these look like a steal — but wineries are encouraging customers to save bottles beyond summer.

"I hope that the overall view of rosé is starting to change," said Boydston. "I think structured and well-made rosés can show beautifully throughout the entire year, whether it's 100 degrees in July or 10 in December."

The Chronicle Food + Wine team conducted a tasting of 10 Bordeaux-inspired rosés from Napa Valley producers. If you're looking to shake up your rosé routine, here are some bottles we recommend.

2022 T. Berkley Rosé of Cabernet Franc, \$25: This was the clear winner of our tasting, and at \$25, it was also the best value. Winemaker Taylor Berkley Boydston makes this wine with both the saignée and direct-press methods, plus he ferments some of the fruit in neutral oak barrels and well-amphora. Don't be turned off by the darker color; this wine is thought-provoking, layered and best of all, savory — just like you'd expect from a Cabernet Franc.

2022 J.H. Wheeler Rosé Napa Valley, \$48: This delicate rosé is made with Cabernet Franc from nearly 40-year-old vines — a rare find in Napa Valley. It's pretty, not just with its pale-peach color but also on the palate with strong strawberry flavors; there's a slight tannin, and the acid lingers long after the finish. Winemaker Nigel Kinsman said this is the first J.H. Wheeler wine to sell out each year.

2022 Cru Rosé, \$45: Juicy with intense strawberry and other red fruit flavors, plus a stunning watermelon hue. This rosé of Merlot with small amounts of Cabernet Franc, Zinfandel, Malbec and Petit Sirah is very tart without going overboard; its distinguishable structure is likely the result of the wine's neutral oak fermentation and barrel aging.

2022 Sullivan Rosé, \$54: This Millennial pink rosé of Merlot has a beautiful bouquet of roses on the nose, plus red fruit, guava and citrus on the palate. It's well-balanced between tangy acidity and a subtle bitter note.

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