

let it BLEED

Only a small percentage of rosé champagne is saignée – made by macerating red grapes. **Anne Krebiehl MW** takes a look at a technique that's easy to admire, but hard to master

Rosé is the one style of champagne that most frequently falls victim to tokenism, with just one listing of pink fizz amongst the numerous NV, blanc de blancs and vintage offerings. While rosé champagne has definitely shaken off any notions of being a less serious or even girly style – not to mention that delicious historic factoid once presented by Pol Roger's Hubert de Billy that 'rosé was the champagne of the *demi-monde*' – it is surprising that not more is made of rosé's wide stylistic spectrum and the possibilities this holds.

There are two fundamental styles: the vast majority of pink champagnes are rosés d'assemblage, which means they are made from a blend of red and white wines. A far smaller number are rosés de maceration, often referred to as 'saignée'.

There is a very real reason for that. While the vast majority of plantings in Champagne are, in fact, red grapes, most

of them end up being vinified as white base wine. According to the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne, 70% of Champagne's total 33,705 hectares are planted to red grapes: 38% Pinot Noir and 32% Pinot Meunier. Less than a

'SAIGNÉE IS A PURE EXPRESSION OF THE PLACE, WHILE BLENDED ROSÉ IS MORE OF AN EXPRESSION OF THE WINEMAKER'
EMMANUEL FOURNY

third of the total acreage is given over to Chardonnay, which covers 30%, mainly in the Côte des Blancs.

In an area as northerly and marginal as Champagne it is difficult to ripen red grapes to a degree that would be suitable for making red wine fermented on its skins – the source of the anthocyanins, or colour, that make a wine red or pink.

A lot of rosé champagne thus mimics

the typical three-variety blend of white champagnes, with an addition of red wine, ranging somewhere between 5% and 30%, before the second fermentation to colour the white base wine pink. This red blending wine usually comes from suitable and warmer vineyards where grapes can ripen to the required degree – and even this is not a given in cooler years.

To make a rosé de maceration, red grapes are very briefly macerated on their skins, just long enough for some colour to leech from the skins into the juice to make a pink base wine. The difficulty here is, of course, to manage consistency of colour and vintage variation. Since there are far fewer rosés de maceration, the belief persists that they are somehow more valuable or better, when in truth they are merely rare.

While some d'assemblage styles, admittedly, are nothing more than nondescript white blends with a tint

ROSÉ

of colour – and therefore an excuse to charge more for a non-existent rosé premium – the difference between rosés de maceration and good rosés d'assemblage is not one of quality but of style.

Emanuel Fourny, winemaker at Veuve Fourny & Fils in Vertus, makes both styles: a saignée rosé called Les Rougesmonts from a single vineyard, and his assemblage Rosé Brut Premier Cru Vertus, blended from three vintages of Chardonnay, white Pinot Noir base and red Pinot Noir base.

He likes to make both, he says, 'because there are two very different results: with saignée you have the pure expression of one Pinot Noir from one place, you have the extraction of one moment, one place, one vintage. With a blend you are traditionally more in the



champagne mould – you just blend to have good consistency and freshness, to have fruit aromas on the nose and freshness and elegance on the palate.

'For me, saignée is a pure expression of the place, while blended rosé is more of an expression of the winemaker.'

Different styles

Fourny concedes that a rosé blended with white base wines might be more delicate, but his Les Rougesmonts is not necessarily about delicacy. It stands to reason that a wine made from 100% Pinot Noir with some skin contact has more structure and body than a rosé champagne blended mainly with white base wines – among which may be very slender Chardonnay.

That's why saignée styles also frequently get settled with the lazy and over-used descriptor 'vinous' – a nebulous term that wants to imply that the style is closer to still wine than to aperitif-like, lighter fizz – without really saying anything at all. After all, isn't all champagne wine?

Frédéric Panaïotis, chef de cave at Ruinart, also insists that the difference between the two methods is stylistic rather than qualitative. 'I am partial to the blending – that's tradition. But in terms of quality it is all down to the quality of the grapes,' he explains. 'Whether it's blended or maceration, the truth will be in the glass, resulting from the quality of the grapes and the winemaking skills, but I don't think there is a technique that is superior.'

Since the Ruinart style of rosé owes much of its famous elegance to Chardonnay, Panaïotis unsurprisingly makes a case for blending and the use of Chardonnay. 'Among the three main varieties of champagne, it is Chardonnay that brings the very specific element of freshness,' he says. 'There is also an aromatic side which is usually citrusy and, in the case of rosé, often develops into notions of pink grapefruit – the image of citrus with a certain richness to it. Our NV rosé incorporates 45% Chardonnay. That is the style of the house, it brings that extra freshness.'

According to Panaïotis, Pinot Noir imparts body and complexity to white

ROSÉ REMINISCENCES

We ask some top somms for their most memorable rosé pairings



VANESSA CINTI BORGIA

Head sommelier, CUT at 45 Park Lane, London

'At a recent champagne dinner I had two favourites: Champagne de Sousa Brut Rosé (which is made by assemblage) with scallop carpaccio and Laurent-Perrier Rosé NV (saignée) with a filet of Wagyu beef. Both were amazing. Due to the bigger flavour profile I use saignée for coursed dinners: you can start and finish a meal, even serve them with steak. I like assemblage for aperitif and lighter dishes but I love both styles. I prefer saignée for vintage styles and more mature wines. It really depends on the food, the company and my mood.'



TOBIAS BRAUWEILER MS

Head sommelier, Hakkasan Hanway Place, London

'Dom Ruinart Rosé 1996 with beef Wellington, perfectly cooked, rosé-infused beef jus and tender beetroot. Magic. During the short summer I drank lots of rosé d'assemblage, fragrant and light. Come Christmas, I might be tempted to buy full-bodied saignée to go with duck and roast beef.'



JAN KONETZKI

Head sommelier, Restaurant Gordon Ramsay, London

'Larmandier-Bernier Extra Brut Rosé de Saignée with turbot on the bone, cooked "en papillote", with sea kelp, cockles and oyster leaves. The rather phenolic grip of the champagne can be challenging as an aperitif but enhances flavours of the sea and complements the meatiness of the turbot.' He also suggests using a Burgundy glass and a serving temperature of 10-12°C.



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champagnes, and structure and texture with a lot of red fruit intensity to rosé champagnes – ‘like a Pinot Noir wearing a Gamay dress if you like,’ he says. ‘The result is a rosé with great brightness, something we are really keen on: beautiful fruit, clean, very lifted, with a palate that combines an element of roundness and smoothness, yet [with] freshness and firmness which in the end makes it lovely to drink.’

About 100 miles south of Epernay, in the Aube, Champagne’s most southerly outpost, where it is slightly warmer and soils are of Kimmeridgian limestone rather than chalk, Pinot Noir has traditionally been the most important variety. Many of the grandes marques

source their red wines for blending into rosés here – but it is also the heartland of the saignée method.

Michel Drappier in Urville has experimented with both styles and uses

‘ROSÉ DE SAIGNÉE IS LIKE SOLID GOLD AS OPPOSED TO GOLD-PLATED’ MICHEL DRAPPIER

an apt metaphor to illustrate his idea of saignée: ‘Rosé de saignée is like solid gold as opposed to gold-plated. Rosé de saignée is real rosé.’

‘Of course I have tried fantastic rosés that were, so to speak, “plated”, made from 90% Chardonnay with 10% Pinot

Noir. It’s just different, you can produce a fantastic rosé that way. However here at Drappier, where we are on Jurassic limestone, Pinot Noir represents our roots and our history. Pinot Noir arrived here

850 years ago: it is our prime raw material. With saignée the aromas are also different, you keep a lot of the red fruit, which is what we and our clients like. We just like “solid” rosé.’

Such ‘solid’ saignée rosés are, of course, eminently suited

to accompanying food – their additional roundness, structure and body gives them mileage far beyond the usual white champagne pairings. The different rosé styles available also justify the presence of more than just that token pink choice on a wine list.



DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Making large volumes of rosé creates a unique set of challenges for Moët’s Benoît Gouez

At the biggest-selling champagne house, Moët & Chandon, sourcing enough red wine poses a great challenge for chef de cave Benoît Gouez. The Brut Imperial Rosé NV that now represents 20% of the house’s production uses 25% of red wine in its blend – half Pinot Noir, half Pinot Meunier, an often underrated variety. This amounts to an awful lot of red wine, especially considering the never-disclosed sum of millions of bottles they make and sell every year.

To cover demand, the house has dedicated state-of-the-art red winemaking facilities in Epernay and Les Riceys in the Aube. Pinot Noir is sourced from the Montagne de Reims and the Aube, and Pinot Meunier from the Vallée de la Marne. While Pinot Noir is fermented on its skins but cannot be made every year, Gouez uses thermovinification to make red Pinot Meunier.

In this process, the grapes are quickly heated to 70°C, then brought down to 50°C. They macerate for two hours before being pressed off. This releases significant amounts of colour but no tannin and does not require the same degree of ripeness as traditional fermentation on skins.

This method has the benefit of giving the wines overtones of ‘blackcurrant, rhubarb and even slightly exotic notes of pineapple’ as well as a soft structure, according to Gouez. While he admits that the wines do not necessarily age as well as traditionally vinified Pinot Noirs, they are ideal for the quick-selling Brut Imperial Rosé NV which is usually consumed upon release.

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