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Rosés enjoy a boom in quality as well as quantity

By Paul Gregutt

Those of a certain age may well have lost their virginity — vinous and otherwise — to the accompaniment of a light, sweet rosé named Mateus. The rotund bottle was ubiquitous on college campuses for a time, because it provided not only refreshment but also mood lighting, as an excellent candle holder.

We've all come a long way since then, and so has rosé. It has its own society — RAP (Rosé Avengers and Producers); its own war (a battle in France over whether blending red and white to make rosé should be legal); legions of admirers and an official "Pink Out!" day in (where else?) San Francisco.

More importantly, the stuff sells. Recent statistics show a 53 percent rise in rosé sales here in the U.S. It's not always easy to quantify sweet versus off-dry versus dry sales, but clearly the dry styles of rosé are the ones gaining popularity as restaurant pours, summer quaffers and versatile picnic wines.

They come in a rainbow of colors from around the world. Many Washington and Oregon wineries release a barrel or two of rosé in the spring and summer, and you will certainly find good examples in your local wine shop. But many more are sold only at the winery tasting room, or offered to mailing-list customers or to the restaurant trade.

Certain grapes grown here in the Northwest do especially well as rosés — cabernet franc, sangiovese, pinot noir and mourvèdre first and foremost. Sometimes these wines are made by a process called saignée, French for "bleeding." The juice of fermenting red wine grapes is quickly drained from the tank before too much color or tannin has been absorbed from contact with the skins. This pale juice is fermented separately, sometimes in stainless steel, sometimes in barrel. The remaining red wine, it is hoped, will be more concentrated as a result.

There is something just plain fun about these dry rosés. They are almost always from the most recent vintage; in fact, you should be suspicious of anything older. These are rarely wines to cellar. Flavors are light and fruity, often reminiscent of watermelon or strawberry or cherry candy. But the best of them go beyond simple fruit and offer additional textures and hints of flower and spice and sometimes cracker or grain.

In Italy the wines are called rosato, in Spain rosado, in Germany weissherbst (leave it to the Germans to come up with something inscrutable). If you see a California wine labeled blush or white zinfandel or white merlot or white anything for that matter, it is quite likely to be sweet. Not that there is anything wrong with sweet, but this summer, why not give dry a try?

With so many different rosés coming into the market (and just as quickly disappearing), the best advice I can give you is to be adventurous and try as many as you can find, rather than hunting for a particular producer. Should you want to explore a particular region, look for a bottle or two from Costières de Nîmes, in the south of France. **Robert Kacher Selections** is one of several importers who bring in these rustic rosés; let your wine

seller guide you as to what's in stock.

Serve them chilled, at the temperature you most prefer for white wines. Dry rosés will be a good match for a wide variety of cheeses, pasta dishes, shellfish, chicken and luncheon meats. The European versions rarely top 13 percent alcohol; tack on another percent or so for wines from America.

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