



PROVENCE'S ALL NEW
ROSÉ TRAIL

BY TRISTAN RUTHERFORD



The wedding of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie in August 2014 shone a light on Provence's rosé. Their private nuptials were conducted in the vineyard of the couple's 35-bedroom mansion, Château Miraval, in the heart of southern French wine country. Their own vintage was used to raise a toast. And little wonder, as Pitt and Jolie's Miraval Rosé 2012 was recently ranked by Wine Spectator magazine as 'the best rosé in the world'. In 2013 the chateau's entire production of 6,000 bottles sold out within five hours.

Fear not. Because one of the few places in the world where it's still possible to sample Miraval is also one of the most fun: Alain Ducasse's new Rivea restaurant in St Tropez. The tree-dappled dining terrace curves around the Hotel Byblos (the super-luxe establishment frequented by Kate Moss and Jay-Z). The menu, like the wine list, is drawn exclusively from the Riviera: think



gnocchi from Nice, lamb from near Cannes, squid from San Remo. Rosé enthusiasts crowd around the alfresco dining deck.

"Obviously, the notoriety of the owners of Château Miraval contributes to many of our clients' wine choice," says Rivea restaurant spokesman Romain Pirat. What a sensation it is. The grey-pink nectar is poured ice cold from a bulbous bottle. It perfumes the nose, subsumes the mouth, then enraptures the throat. "The pale colour and notes of white flowers and red fruits are present in Miraval created by Jolie, Pitt and Perrin (the chateau's viticulteur, or wine manager)," explains Pirat. But the backstory of rosé wine is hardly one of glitz and glamour.



Rosé may be undergoing a worldwide boom, but it came from humble roots. A century ago the pink drink was produced cheaply in France's poorer Provence region, which stretches from Avignon in the West to Monaco in the East. Parisian sophisticates preferred the bitter complexity of reds from Bordeaux and Burgundy, and were mistrustful of such a bargain drink. In 1990, 80% of wine drunk in the country was vin rouge, compared to 10% vin rosé. And what France drinks, the world follows.

Over the last 25 years, that's all changed. Foreign vineyard owners like Pitt and Jolie have brought marketing know-how to Provence. Better still, a volley of cool country hotels have

Opposite: Grapes ripening in the Provençal sun; From top left: Wine tasting at the Bellef Vineyard; France Bellef Chateau Cremat; Gourmet cuisine at Alain Ducasse's Rivea restaurant



Above: Luberon Gorges view; Opposite: Mirabeau Vineyard's premium Pure vintage



Above: La Bastide de Marie sits in beautiful setting of vineyards; Opposite, from top: Tables set for dinner at Alain Ducasse's restaurant in St Tropez; Mirabeau Vineyard's premium Pure vintage



been carved out of ancient mansions near to Château Miraval. Some, like Hotel La Coquillade, pair Michelin-star cuisine and rosé from the surrounding vineyard with mountain bike tours of local wineries. Regional wine promotion group Conseil des Vins de Provence has relentlessly pushed the product abroad. It offers its entire website in Mandarin. Even the French themselves now consume 50% red and 30% rosé. A massive 40% of national production comes from Provence.

Come and see for yourself. Pirat recommends the Domaines Ott near Saint-Tropez where, he claims, “the rosé is fabulous.” (Like all good hotels, both Byblos and La Coquillade will organise a driver, hire car or bicycle depending on your preference.) Terrace upon terrace of grapevines tumble down a south-facing slope. Their ruby-dark Grenache and Cinsault grapes soak up around 2,800 hours of sunshine per year. Come August, the bunches are handpicked at dawn then crushed immediately to retain the flavour. The red grape skin is removed after a few hours, just enough to lend the subsequent wine a pink grapefruit blush. In dark oak barrels the sun-rich sugars are magically effervesced into alcohol.

Opposite: La Bastide de Marie “Roulotte” interior; Top: La Bastide de Marie “Roulotte” exterior

Then the spirit of Provence is bottled and shipped worldwide. (Singapore takes 0.3% of France’s rosé production, compared to China’s 0.4% and the UK’s 6.6%). It’s best drunk young and fresh, unlike the heady reds of Rioja, Chianti, Barolo and of course Bordeaux.

Like 430 of the region’s 600 vineyards, Domaines Ott’s cellars are open to visitors for free tastings. Of course, after sipping a few bottles it’s polite to purchase a few, although cellar prices are far less expensive than a restaurant or shop. Samplers should look for nose (expect a strong whiff of delicate aromas), then taste (move around the mouth to find sugars, salts and other tangs) and finish (how the wine persists on the palette).

According to British vintner Stephen Cronk, who took over Provence’s Mirabeau vineyard several years ago, wine-tasting in Provence is even more exciting than elsewhere in France. “The three main appellations (Côtes de Provence, Coteau Varois en Provence and Coteau d’Aix) cover a massive 26,500 hectares,” explains the award-winning wine maker. The terroir, or geographical area, changes rapidly. Yearly frosts alter the flowering cycle of vines near landlocked Aix-en-Provence. Sea breezes cool the Bellet vineyards high above Nice. Myriad grape varieties all influence the flavour, from the tobacco tannins of Syrah to the

citrus buzz of local grape Vermentino. Mirabeau’s signature Pure Rosé uses the spice and intensity of the Grenache variety. Financial Times wine critic Jancis Robinson called it: “Firm and scented with a satin texture”.

Cronk also advises rosé enthusiasts to stop into the Maison des Vins education centre, which “has cleverly put most of the wines in one place for people to visit”. It’s close to both Château Miraval and Domaines Ott, and sells 800 Côtes de Provence wines at producer prices. It also has a gastronomic restaurant serving Provençal cuisine, not to mention a cellar-full of local vintages.

For the complete rosé experience, it’s best to bed down in serious style. Nowhere does Provençal luxury quite like La Bastide de Marie. Guests may dine on scrambled eggs topped with local black truffles right next to the hotel’s 23-hectare vineyard. One may literally lean over from a linen-topped table and pick a bunch of grapes for dessert. The 15 suites pair high linen counts with stone floors and vineyard views. The best room in the house is surely the Roulotte, a hip gypsy caravan sited in the middle of the vines.

Needless to say, the house beverage is currently the Grenache-Cinsault blend Rosé Marie 2013. It’s pale pink and powerful, and is wholly produced a short walk away. Exports of rosé were up 15% last year. Now we know why.