

**WINE SCHOOL**

# A Rosé by Any Other Color

**By Eric Asimov**

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The color of a wine can convey a lot about its character. But color is easy to misinterpret, and sometimes reveals less than it seems.

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This seeming paradox arises because analyzing the color of a wine requires an understanding of context and many variables. Too often, people make reflex judgments of a wine based solely on its color.

Twenty years ago, for example, the American public seemed fixated on the color of red wines. The darker the wine, the thinking went, the denser, more powerful and more concentrated it was, and therefore the better it was presumed to be.

This simple, blanket association of darker color with higher quality made no sense, nor, for that matter, did the assumption that power and concentration were always better.

Some red grapes, like nebbiolo, sangiovese and pinot noir, can make intense wines that are naturally paler hued than wines made with, say, cabernet sauvignon or syrah, grapes that ordinarily yield darker colors.

The intensity and luminosity of colors can also vary depending on other factors, like the pH of the wine and its level of acidity. Colors of red wines will also change as they age. The bright glow of youth will fade with time, as the edges of a cabernet sauvignon, perhaps blue-black in its youth, turn the color of bricks.

At the peak of this obsession with dark red wines, some producers who no doubt knew better, employed methods to make their wines darker, whether allowing the juice to macerate longer with the pigment-rich skins or using additives like Mega Purple, a grape concentrate used to “correct” the color of a wine, that is, make it darker.

Both of these approaches have their downsides. Overmaceration could result in extracting too much tannin and other elements from the skins, resulting in wines that were dark but heavy, astringent and out of balance, perhaps requiring further manipulation. Mega Purple can make a wine seem soft and sweet.

This association of dark colors with high quality is by no means solely a recent phenomenon. Older generations of winemakers, without access to modern tools, bred a class of dark-fleshed grapes primarily for blending to darken a wine’s color. These include alicante bouschet, often a part of old California field blends, and the aptly named colorino, a traditional blending grape in Chianti.

In our current wine-drinking era, the opposite perception seems to reign with rosé. Nowadays, many people assume that the paler the rosé, the better or more attractive it is.

Perhaps no wine is as judged by its color as rosé. Possibly this is because no other wine comes in so many immediately discernible hues and shades, from the palest pink — referred to by the French as oeil de perdrix, or partridge’s eye — to scarlet and ruby. The color itself gives little hint of the quality or character of the wine.

And yet, the public is so enchanted with pale rosés that winemakers will go to great lengths to give them what they want, often to the detriment of the wine.

For the last month at Wine School, we’ve been drinking dark rosés, both to counter the notion that rosés must be pale but also to examine the question of what color conveys about wine. As usual I suggested three bottles. They were: Broc Cellars North Coast Love Rosé 2020, Château de Trinquedel Tavel 2020 and Tiberio Cerasuolo d’Abruzzo 2020.

All three are darker than your average rosé, though they each varied slightly. The Broc was garnet-colored, with perhaps a tinge of orange. The Trinquedel was garnet, too, but a slightly paler shade than the Broc, while the Tiberio was a pale ruby, with no orange at all.

Beyond these minor color distinctions, the wines are actually quite different. The Trinquedel was from Tavel, a French appellation just southwest of Châteauneuf-du-Pape that only produces rosés.

The Tiberio was from the Abruzzo region on the Adriatic coast of Italy, while the Broc was from Northern California.

The three were also made with entirely different grapes. The Broc was primarily valdigué, a variety once called “Napa gamay” in California, along with some zinfandel and trousseau. The Tiberio was made entirely of montepulciano, while the Trinqueddel was a blend of Southern Rhône grapes, including 60 percent grenache, 18 percent cinsault, 5 percent syrah, 5 percent mourvèdre and, interestingly, 12 percent clairette, a white grape.

This blend might seem to account for its garnet color. While some basic rosés are indeed made by blending a little red wine with a white, the small percentage of clairette in the blend argues against the method.

Instead, as has been traditional in the Southern Rhône, the white is used in a red blend to add freshness. As with the other two wines, the color was achieved by macerating the red grapes with their skins just long enough to reach the desired shades.

Beyond color, origin and production, the wines differed quite a bit. The Broc was bone dry, lightly spicy, tangy and fresh. It was just 11 percent alcohol, the kind of wine you could drink for refreshment at the beach or by the pool. This fit in well with the popular conception of rosés as simple, easygoing wines, although I would say the Broc was a superb example.

The Trinqueddel was entirely different. It was rich and powerful at 14.2 percent alcohol, with a floral aroma. On the palate it was more earthy and mineral than fruity, with depth and dimension.

The Tiberio was likewise bigger and more serious than the Broc at 14 percent alcohol, but with more acidity than the Trinqueddel. It seemed to combine tangy, juicy flavors of red fruits with a chalky minerality.

I felt as if I could offer all three wines at a single dinner party. The Broc would be the aperitif, with hors d'oeuvres. The Tiberio could go with the midcourse. It was light enough for shellfish yet juicy enough to stand up to something heartier, like roast chicken. Meanwhile, the Trinqueddel seemed sturdy enough for a veal roast or Umbrian-style rabbit or chicken alla cacciatora.

A simpler differentiation would be to call the Broc a vin de soif, or a wine for quenching thirst, while the other two are more gastronomic, intended to go with meals.

As different as these wines are, was the color really meaningful? Dark doesn't translate as powerful — witness the Broc. You could say that it does for the other two, but I've had pale rosés from all over that were just as potent.

Far more important is a winemaker's intent. Is the goal to make the best wine possible, however that is judged? Or is it to make the palest wine possible?

More than anything, color is just one more aesthetic consideration. And really, rosés of every shade are gorgeous. For me, however, the color will never be the primary consideration, unless I am constructing a table tableau.

I think many readers would agree with me, especially after enjoying these wines. Max de Zarobe of Montepulciano, Italy (the place in Tuscany, not the grape of the same name), conjectured that Instagram and other visual social media might not only be responsible for the fixation on color but also for the rising popularity of rosé.

Quite a few people also expressed longstanding affection for Tavel, which Eduardo of Florida called the “undisputed kinds of rosés.” I'm sure other regions might take issue with that statement. He also said, “Nothing has the body, mouthfeel and taste of a Tavel,” which might be closer to the truth.

Jeff and Kay of Media, Penn., had less experience with Tavel. But after trying the Trinqueddel, they called it “their new favorite rosé.”

One reader, I fear, drew the wrong lesson from this exercise. “Dark rosé rules,” said Jon Parrish of Manhattan. “Provence pinks not so interesting.”

That's simply trading one color fixation for another. Plenty of pale rosés can be wonderful. The color is not the deciding factor.

VSB of San Francisco intended to buy the Broc Love Rosé but mistakenly took home a Broc Sonoma Valley white zinfandel, a similarly dark-colored rosé. He used the error as an opportunity, as he put it, “to revisit and perhaps reject old biases.”

What a great approach. As it turned out, he very much enjoyed the wine, demonstrating again that categories should not be rejected wholesale, even if a preponderance of examples are not very good.

Finally, I would like to shout out several readers who have used Wine School as an opportunity to gather regularly with friends to drink the wines. Debbie Lange of Wisconsin has now had 68 Wine School dinners with up to 20 friends. George Erdle of Charlotte, N.C., said the dark rosé dinner was his group's 86th. And Dan Barron and Ali of New York have had too many to count.

This is really the ultimate point. Many of us have learned we could safely enjoy wine alone during the pandemic. But at its best it's a social pleasure, to be shared with friends and family, usually with wine itself the least important topic of discussion. For everybody who has used Wine School as an excuse to gather, bravo!

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