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The Chronicle Wine Selections: Dry Imported Rosé

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More stores and restaurants are responding to consumers' growing interest in rosé wine, which has become the hot quaffer to quell the heat of warm weather. Both imported and domestic rosés are becoming increasingly available - a good thing since more consumers are discovering them.

Most rosés currently on retail shelves are imports, accounting for 76.6 percent of U.S. rosé sales, according to the Nielsen Co. Still, the number of domestic versions, which we will review next week, is also increasing dramatically.

Practically every winemaking region produces this enjoyable pink drink. A similar diversity of grapes make these wines, including red Bordeaux and Rhone varieties, Barbera and Tempranillo, as well as more obscure grapes like Gaglioppo and Zweigelt.

Rosé is made with juice from red and black grapes that has had minimal contact with the dark grape skins, which contribute color and a small amount of tannins to the wine.

Last year, the panel tasted 72 imported rosés from 14 countries, recommending 11. This year's imports numbered 93, of which 17 are recommended below - a pleasant improvement from last year's less promising showing. Relatively few wines were submitted again this year, including last year's 3-star R. Lopez de Heredia Vina Tondonia Crianza Rioja Rosé. But the number of new entries this year underscores the diversity of choices available on shelves.

The majority of our recommendations are from France, which comprised more than 25 percent of the wines we tasted. The French have been making rosé for a while and for the most part doing it well.

While the wines ranged from light- to medium-bodied, the panel enjoyed those with good fruit expression, moderate intensity, zippy acidity and great balance. Most had minimal tannins - as rosé should - but several showed a little grip, which adds textural interest. Well-made rosé generally garners a solid 2- to 2.5-star rating, though occasionally a few rise above. All should be enjoyable. Try a few bottles, find your favorite and stock up for the summer.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Bastianich Venezia Giulia Rosato (\$15) Earthy nose with loam and herb roots; high-pitched floral note above cherry, dried blackberry, and spice aromas and flavors. Exotic and lean with mineral bounce and grip on the palate. From winemaker and restaurateur Joseph Bastianich, who founded Italian Wine Merchants and whose mother is culinary expert Lydia Bastianich. This wine is 100 percent Refosco - a lesser-known Northern Italian red grape. (Importer: Dark Star Imports)

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Cantina Terlan Alto Adige Lagrein Rosé (\$17) Slight musky aromas with citrus and olive. Dense, almost meaty texture; intense dusty blackberry. Medium body, brightness and grip with great expression. From Italy. (Importer: Banville & Jones Wine Merchants)

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 Cascina La Ghera Piage Monferrato Chiaretto Barbera (\$15) Slight funk and musk on nose amid tart raspberry and lemon zest, plus earth and mineral notes. Straightforward

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with bright, acidic backbone. From Italy. (Importer: Epic Wines)

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 Chateau Saint Martin de la Garrigue Coteaux du Languedoc Rosé (\$12) Slight herb and chive blossom notes over strawberry and passion fruit aromas; lean, fresh palate with plum, cherry and mineral nuance. Made with 50 percent Mourvedre, 40 Syrah, 10 Grenache Noir. From France. (Importer: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant)

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Domaine du Jas D'Esclans Cru Classe Cotes de Provence Rosé (\$23) More complex, aromatic nose but less intensity on palate; strawberry, orange peel, chopped herb with pink grapefruit peel and grip on finish. Contains 60 percent Cinsault, 30 Grenache, 10 Carignan. From France. (Importer: Organic Vintners)

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 Domaine Saint Andre de Figuiere Le Saint Andre Vin de Pays du Var Rosé (\$10.50) Light salmon color with light, delicate body. Strawberry, plum skin and some mineral with fresh herb and a hint of cotton candy on finish; straightforward with mouthwatering acidity. French, with 25 percent each Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Grenache and Cinsault. (Importer: Dee Vine Wines)

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 El Portillo Mendoza Malbec Rosé (\$11) Meaty, peppery, earthy and soy notes under the sweet-tart currant, strawberry with tart citrus and herbal punch on finish. Spice, zippy acidity and grip in this straightforward Argentine wine. (Importer: San Francisco Wine Exchange; the 2007 vintage is imported by Palm Bay International)

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Fra Guerau Montsant Rosé (\$15) Floral aromatics, roasted cauliflower, loam and caramel hints with crushed blueberry and peach skin on finish. A stoic, dark-toned effort with plenty of structure. Montsant is within Spain's larger Tarragona region. Made with 50 percent Merlot, 25 Syrah, 25 Garnacha. (Importer: Freixenet)

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 La Vieille Ferme Cotes du Ventoux Rosé (\$10) Meaty nose of bacon, underripe berry and nectarine with some underlying gravel and tannin on the clean fruit finish. Produced from 50 percent Cinsault, 40 Grenache and 10 Syrah by Jean Pierre Perrin - a member of France's Perrin family of Chateau de Beaucastel. (Importer: Vineyard Brands)

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 Librandi Ciro Rosato (\$14) Crushed strawberry with peppery spice. Ripe, plush; a little alcohol showing. Mineral punch and grip on the finish. The wine is 100 percent Gaglioppo, which is prevalent in Calabria, Italy; when vinified as red wine, it has been described by some as a straightforward Nebbiolo. (Importer: Winebow)

Rating: THREE STARS 2007 Loimer Kamptal Rosé Table Wine (\$15) Stony slate, strawberry-rhubarb compote and crushed blackberry aromas and flavors. Lean, grippy, taut profile with lengthy finish. A standout for the price. It's 100 percent Zweigelt, which is Austria's most widely grown red grape - a 1922 cross between Blaufrankisch and St. Laurent. (Importer: Vin Divino)

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Mas Grand Plagniol Costieres de Nimes Rosé (\$12) Full, weighty and a bit fleshy with a ripe but dry finish. Sweet cherry, ancho chile, cinnamon and plum aromas; similar flavors plus plum skin and some tannic grip on finish. Good even with medium-rare grilled beef. From France. (Importer: Winewise)

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 Sabine Coteaux d'Aix en Provence Syrah-Grenache Rosé (\$11) Named after winemaker Charles Bieler's daughter; cherry, peach pit and spiced, peppery finish. Weight and body enough to pair with pork and rare ahi tuna. Contains 70 percent Syrah, 30 Grenache from France. Good value. (Importer: Trincherio Vineyards)

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2007 Triennes Vin de Pays du Var Rosé (\$21) Dry dusty berry, red apple skin; lean with good acidity. Edgy, with pretty fruit on the palate. Pink grapefruit peel and slight grip on the finish. Outperforms its light profile. From France. (Importer: The Sorting Table)

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 Vignerons des Caves de Provence L'Estandon Cotes de Provence Rosé (\$11) Sweet raspberry, candied cherry Jolly Rancher and watermelon, with a spun sugar note on the nose, but lean and lively on the palate. Focused and tapered with slight pepper on the finish. Nice summer quaffer from France. (Importer: Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines)

Rating: TWO STARS 2007 Vignerons du Mont-Ventoux Les Demoiselles Coiffées Cotes du Ventoux Rosé (\$11) Straightforward cherry, tangerine and mineral with herbal hint; lean acidity, light-bodied with long, focused finish. French-made blend of 50 percent Grenache, 30 Carignan and 20 Cinsault. (Importer: International Vineyards)

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2007 Vignerons du Mont-Ventoux Cotes du Ventoux O Rosé (\$13) Concentrated tart fruit on nose, plenty of mineral and herb, with watermelon, orange blossom and peach skin. Well-balanced French rosé with less-ripe berry and an acidic backbone; even better with food. (Importer: International Vineyards)

Panelists include Lynne Char Bennett, Chronicle staff writer and wine coordinator; Jeff Berlin, sommelier, A Coté; Jon Bonné, Chronicle wine editor. For more recommended wines, go to sfgate.com/wine.

Key: Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARSExcellent Rating: TWO STARS Good

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