

RESTAURANTS

WINE NOTES

Think Pink

James Bond drank Bollinger in *Moonraker*. Bogart sipped Mumm's in *Casablanca*. And Veuve Clicquot's starring role in *Babette's Feast* helped launch the brand globally. Champagne has been regarded as a celebratory and exclusive drink since it was first introduced in the States. Pink champagne, on the other hand, has had a bad rep since day one.

At 1920s dance parties, flappers got tipsy on a sweet, coarse beverage that they called pink champagne but that had little in common with the real stuff. Instead it was usually a cheap rosé or a California burgundy pumped with carbon dioxide in large pressurized tanks. (Called the tank or carbonation method, the process is still used by some low-end sparkling wine producers.) Then there's the blush beverage's association with cold duck, the overly sweet mixture of champagne, burgundy, and sugar served at 60s cocktail parties. It probably didn't help pink champagne's reputation when the Eagles put it on ice in "Hotel California."

Legend has it the real rosé champagne was created accidentally in the early 1800s, when a pinot noir was overpressed during bubbly production, causing the grape's color to bleed. (By French law, three grape varieties are required to make champagne: chardonnay, a white grape, and pinot noir and pinot meunier, both black.) Initially vintners shunned the pink wine because it harked back to the cloudy, unrefined champagnes they'd produced in the early days. Eventually they came to consider the subtle hue elegant, but the results of trying to extract color from the grapes themselves were inconsistent. They tried introducing a concoction of elderberries and cream of tartar fixed with alum to the already blended champagne. Though the color was more consistent, the process was too labor-intensive, and in time it too gave way to the current method: adding a small proportion (10 to 18 percent) of still pinot noir just before the second fermentation. The quality of the still wine, of course, helps determine the quality of the finished product. Says Mireille Guiliano, president and CEO of Clicquot Inc., the American subsidiary of the French house that produces Veuve Clicquot: "We only add our own pinot noir, harvested at our house vineyard in Bouzy."

Though French rosé champagne became more readily available in the

States after prohibition ended, prices remained high and cheaply made versions continued to dominate the market for most of the century. But lately its image seems to be changing. In October, Guiliano brought three vintages of rosé champagne to Gerhard Doll, executive chef at Avenues, the seafood restaurant in the Peninsula Hotel.

Doll didn't balk. Instead he was eager to dispel the notions that champagne is best reserved for special occasions and that pink champagne, in particular, shouldn't be paired with food. "Rosé is a special champagne," he says. Put to the challenge of matching the bottles from Veuve Clicquot to an elegant four-course meal, he did what any thinking chef would do—he sampled them. "We had to taste the wines, then build the food around them," he says—the opposite of the wine-pairing approach taken at most restaurants. "The

dishes had to be delicate; no ingredients too strong in flavor."

At Doll's dinner, the liveliness of the young Veuve Clicquot Rosé Reserve 1995—with aromas of minerals,

spices, and raspberries and a mildly spicy finish—did well with a tartare of wild loup de mer topped with osetra caviar and a dollop of creamy lime yogurt, standing up to the tartness of the yogurt without overpowering the simple dish. Doll continued with this wine for the next course: a terrine of mellow golden beets with langoustines and a salad of baby mache with a verjus reduction. Here, the true flavors of the dish shone next to the champagne's palate-cleansing acidity.

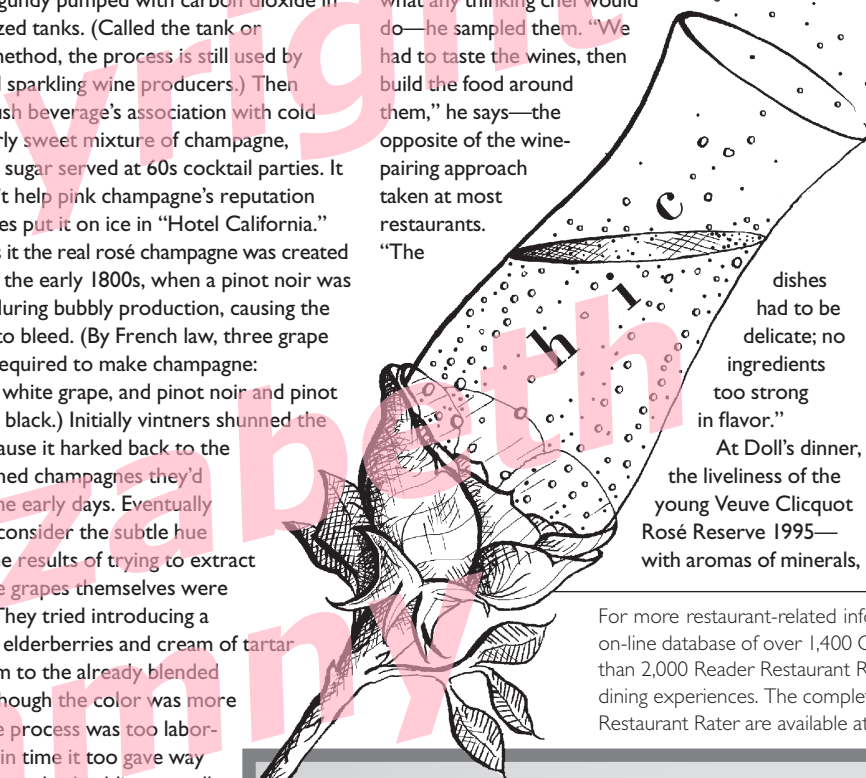
Next up was the 1990 Veuve Clicquot Rosé Reserve, with floral and mineral notes along with aromas of red currants and violets. Doll seared live sea scallops and a slice of rich foie gras, then set them atop a cannellini-bean ragout and doused the whole thing in shellfish consomme. The intensity and richness of the food worked with the more developed and mature champagne.

The final match was unusual yet stunning: the 1985 vintage with a mildly smoked turbot, accented with baby golden chanterelle mushrooms, caramelized cipollini (tiny bulb onions), bay leaf jus, and truffle emulsion. "The older vintage had a more meaty texture and a more profound nose that matched ideally with the smoked turbot," says Doll. The wine's good fruit character (cherries and wild strawberries) added a contrasting sweetness to the dish, and the finish lingered.

Though pink champagne has come a long way, it's still easier to find the cheap stuff. And be forewarned: the real deal will set you back a pretty penny. Below is a list of good pink champagnes and sparkling wines available in Chicago, including one—Laurent-Perrier—that still uses the original method of bleeding the grapes for their color.

—LAURA LEVY SHATKIN

For more restaurant-related information see the Reader Restaurant Finder, a dynamic on-line database of over 1,400 Chicago-area restaurants. Restaurants are rated by more than 2,000 Reader Restaurant Raters, who feed us information and comments on their dining experiences. The complete listings and information on how to become a Reader Restaurant Rater are available at www.chicagoreader.com/restaurantfinder.



TEN UNDER \$50

- Bouvet Rosé Excellence** (Loire Valley), \$9.99 (Sam's)
- Domaine Ste. Michelle Blanc de Noir** (Washington State), \$12.99 (Whole Foods)
- 1995 Iron Horse Brut Rosé** (Sonoma County), \$20.99 (Sam's)
- 1998 Schramsberg Brut Rosé Cuvée de Pinot** (Napa Valley), \$22.99 (Sam's)
- Henri Billiot Brut Rosé** (Champagne), \$27.99-\$34.99 (Wine Discount Center, Howard's Wine Cellar)
- Nicholas Feuillatte Brut Rosé** (Champagne), \$29.99-\$34.99 (Sam's, Wine Crier, Whole Foods)
- 1996 Bellavista Franciacorta Gran Cuvée Brut Rosé** (Italy), \$36.99 (Sam's)
- Taittinger Cuvée Brut Prestige Rosé** (Champagne), \$39.99-\$46.99 (Galleria, Sam's, Fox & Obel)
- Billecart-Salmon Brut Rosé** (Champagne), \$43.99 (Sam's)

Laurent-Perrier Cuvée Rosé Brut

(Champagne), \$43.99-\$48.99 (Galleria, Sam's, Howard's Wine Cellar, Wine Discount Center, Trotter's to Go)

SPLURGES

- Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame Rosé** (magnum), \$339.99 (Sam's)
- Moët & Chandon Dom Perignon Rosé** 1993 (\$149.99, Sam's) or 1990 (\$189.99, Binny's)
- 1995 Louis Roederer Cristal Rosé**, \$279.99 (Binny's)
- Krug Champagne Brut Rosé**, \$199.99 (Sam's)

GALLERIA 1559 N. Wells, 312-867-7070

SAM'S WINES AND SPIRITS 1720 N. Marcey, 312-664-4394

BINNY'S BEVERAGE DEPOT 3000 N. Clark, 773-935-9400

WINE DISCOUNT CENTER 1862 N. Elston, 773-489-3454

WINE CRIER 2070 N. Clybourn, 773-404-8684

WHOLE FOODS MARKET 1000 W. North, 312-587-0648

HOWARD'S WINE CELLAR 1244 W. Belmont, 773-248-3766

FOX & OBEL 401 E. Illinois, 312-410-7301

TROTTER'S TO GO 1337 W. Fullerton, 773-868-6510