



Pink bubbly makes big inroads as sales triple

Popularity of rosé champagne has reached new heights since the millennium with its visual appearance giving a sense of occasion

Have there been A-level results celebrations in your family (over-18s only, of course...)? And if the answer is yes, which colour bubbles did you choose?

Over recent years, just as the successes have multiplied so too has consumption of pink champagne. Import figures show that in the seven years from the millennium UK sales very nearly tripled. And, last year, of the 13 million bottles which left the cool, chalk-cut cellars of Epernay, Reims and around for destinations worldwide, 2.8 million were destined for UK drinkers, the most enthusiastic consumers, outside France, of the pink bubbles.

It could all, of course, be part of the overall surge in popularity of rosé wine here, perhaps fashion more than a palate preference. But pink champagne is undeniably pretty, and that contributes to the sense of occasion. I've had two sample bottles recently (because of their makers' involvement with arts events, of which more below) and they certainly won over the home tasting panel.

Pricier

Would we have recognised them as rosés though, had we drunk them blindfolded? It's an interesting question, prompted by the pertinent comment by Jancis Robinson MW a couple of years ago that from her own tasting experience "a huge proportion of rosé champagne is a fairly cynical product that merely ticks the visual box of being pink" (see www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/a20110901.html).

In the case of bottle number one, delicate Canard-Duchêne, perhaps no; for bottle number two, the much deeper-flavoured



■ Rosé champagne in the glass

Picture: Champagne Bureau

Thiénot, probably yes. Both did have much more red fruit scent and flavour than most white champagnes at a similar price level and less of the frequently found leesy, brioche character.

There's little dispute that pink champagne is pricier than white. A good part of the reason lies in the way it's made – most frequently by adding a proportion of local red wine, from pinot noir grapes, to the white blend before the second fermentation. This is quite unlike normal rosé wine production, in Europe certainly, where the pink colour comes from the skins of red grapes left in contact with their juice as the winemaking begins. "Doctoring" white wine with red isn't generally allowed, except for champagne.

Here, in the far north of France's wine growing area, conditions for fully ripening grapes aren't always good. That

doesn't matter too much for the bubbly white – the resulting acidity can be an advantage. But making good red wine is harder. So as rosé champagne's popularity grows, so does the demand for red wine. Its price rises, and inevitably pink fizz costs more.

Marketing decisions have a part to play, too, and the commercial success of many champagne houses shows how astute they are in that respect.

Whether you choose to pay for the "c" word or are happy to have a cheaper alternative (there are a lot of pretty sparklers made by the same second-fermentation-in-bottle method) must be an entirely personal decision. Here are the art-linked details of the pink champagnes I referred to above (both made with the addition of red wine), and two of my favourite alternatives:

Canard-Duchêne Authentic Rosé is supporting the current Open Air Theatre season in Regent's Park (*The Sound of Music* continues until September 7); Thiénot Brut Rosé was the exclusive fizz at this year's Oscar celebrations (RRPs £30 and £40 respectively, there are various on-line suppliers; go to www.wine-searcher.com to compare prices and delivery charges).

Or buy British: Ridgeview Fitzrovia Rosé 2010 (£22, The Wine Society) is a champagne in all but name – a lovely, stylish wine; or go for one of the many good-value French crémants: Simmonet-Febvre Crémant de Bourgogne Brut Rosé (£12.50, Wine Rack) has bright, fresh red fruit and a dry crisp finish.



■ Unwanted red grapes – unusual now – left on the vine after a hot champagne harvest

restaurant of the week

Weighty matter isn't solved by choice of eatery

Neapolitan cooking couldn't make up for getting lost, dodging fat people in crowded streets and spectacles going missing

In the street, fat people walk into you. Emaciated people will do this as well, of course – but not with such potentially bone-crushing determination as fat people do. I was reminded of this rather horrible truth in Camden High Street, which one rather recent hot afternoon my wife and I had been pounding up and down in search of a restaurant that was on my list. I had no idea which end of the street it was, but I did have the number. Round about Parkway, there was some phone shop numbered 165 so we wandered past that until the next number came up (not many shops bother with it) and that was 191 so clearly we were going in the wrong direction because the place I was after was thirty-something and so we traipsed past the blessed phone shop again and crossed the road and there was number 220, so it was all most confusing, not to say bleeding annoying.

Turned around again – and oh look! There's the sodding phone shop again ... yes and it was around this point that I observed the phenomenon one more time: fat people, they walk right into you – as a galleon unto a little boat. And I have given considerable thought as to why this should be so (it's a weighty matter): it might be because their bulk allows them little manoeuvrability, or it could be because their eyes are rendered hardly more than slits, due to the insistence of face all around them ... but I came to the conclusion that it was neither of these factors: fat people walk into you because they are eating – there is always something being held in front of their faces, so they can't see where they are going, and nor do they care.

And talking of eating ... my wife and I were getting more hungry, and this restaurant we were chasing was appearing to be increasingly fictional.

“There are half a dozen rossopomodoros in the trendier parts of London – and no I'm not going to go into why in God's name the two words have been elided, their capitals expunged



■ The cafés at Kenwood and Regent's Park are taking part in Herbfest

Picture: Lia Vittone

Joseph Connolly at rossopomodoro in Camden Town



■ Joseph at rossopomodoro in Jamestown Road

“We could,” I suggested, “go somewhere else...?” Ah – but where? There were several places that proclaimed themselves to be a “diner” (so burgers, then) and there was Taste of Siam, but I honestly didn’t think I was in a Siamese frame of mind.

Choice

Oh Christ, this was turning into one of those nightmares: I mean, look – I’m supposed to be a professional restaurant critic and here I am stranded in Camden High Street not understanding even how the numbers work and I’m hot and I don’t know which way to go and fat people keep on walking in to me. I stopped, to take stock. Outside the 99p shop, actually – whose façade was

subtitled “Everything for less than a pound”. Later on, when I was at home, I did the maths: and you know what ...? They’re right!

And then I thought – I know! Jamestown Road – there are lots of places there. My wife said nothing: she was starving and exhausted, and never speaks when she gets like that. But Jamestown Road proved to be something of a bonanza: Camden Brasserie (done that one – very good), Diner, Wagamama (done the Hampstead branch), Yo! Sushi! (No! Thanks!), Byron (done the Finchley Road branch) ... and something rather new: rossopomodoro. And that’s where we went – slumping with gratitude on to a table next to the large slid-open window on the street ... though not before

I made a further observation: despite all the noisome boutiques around here selling every sort of colourful attire – 1950s tea frocks, military jackets, Batik, you name it – everyone in the street is wearing a T-shirt and jeans. Even the fat people who walk into you. In rossopomodoro, the pretty waitresses wore T-shirts and jeans, and so did all the lunchers.

There are half a dozen rossopomodoros in the trendier parts of London – and no I’m not going to go into why in God’s name the two words have been elided, their capitals expunged. Suffice it to say that it means red tomato – the word pomodoro reminding us of its original connotation, “love-apple”: a romantic fruit (although in this country “red tomato” is

more likely to put us in mind of the big squeeze plastic number beloved of Wimpy bars of yore). Here was traditional Neapolitan cooking, a waitress explained in English that was not so much broken as atomised. So we ordered salumiere to get us going – a circular lump of wood bearing buffalo bresaola, salami and Parma ham with “croutons” (which turned out to be two great hunks of freshly burned bread). All good – though the thick and angrily red salami did pack a fiery ending. A waitress said “You ready order ...?” and I said we’d like a carafe or ordinary water and could I please see the wine list ...? And she said “You ready order ...?” – so all that took a while. Eventually we got finanziaria – candeale pasta (like very fat penne) with minced beef, chicken livers, peas and field mushrooms (for my wife) and pacchero for me: large folded pasta squares with beef meatballs, peas, smoked mozzarella and tomato ragu. The actual pasta was excellent – just the right bite, the (not many) tiny meatballs flavoursome, the ragu thick and just a little oversweet, the peas a pretty and useful addition. My wife, though, had rather chosen the short straw: it all looked very pleasing, but there was too much cream, not enough flavour. “It needs garlic,” she said. “It needs ... something”. The chicken livers were completely undetectable, and the whole thing really very bland. The waitress poured her Moretti beer and immediately said “You want another ...?”

Slogans

The place is large and very cool: tiled floor, plank tables, shelves full of stuff that ought to be in the kitchen, some high chairs clustered around high tables (why?), bad but sexy Italian pop music and concrete pillars, one of which bore a Banksy-style portrait of maybe Micky Dolenz of The Monkees, or else some other passing and unrelated deadbeat. Mirrors are elegantly daubed with bite-size slogans such as “Your heart is a weapon the size of a fist”, which can only really begin to make any sense when you are very

drunk indeed. My wife enjoyed an amaretta – custard ice cream with crumbled amaretti biscuits and a healthy glug of the eponymous liqueur ... and then we wandered back any way at all that would avoid Camden High Street and found ourselves in Stables Market which is vibrant and alive with all sorts of bright and zingy clothing for sale – budget versions of the sort of duds that Helena Bonham-Carter seems endearingly to be wedded to – but the place was full to bursting with guys and gals in just T-shirts and jeans, not to say fat people who walked into me.

Postscript: My wife managed to leave her glasses in the restaurant, and so she immediately telephoned and said: “Hello, sorry to trouble you but we have just minutes ago left your restaurant and I was sitting with my husband – he was the one with the hair – by the large window just to the left of the entrance and I think my glasses, which are red and black, must be on the table or maybe the floor – do you think you could look for them, please – or maybe they might have been handed in ...?” And the waitress replied “You want make reservation ...?”

Post-postscript: The glasses were never found.

■ Joseph Connolly’s latest novel ENGLAND’S LANE is published by Quercus as a hardback and ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **rossopomodoro**
10 Jamestown Road, NW1
Tel: 020 7424 9900
- Open Mon-Thu noon-11pm,
Fri-Sat noon-11.30pm,
Sun noon-10pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Reasonable pizza and pasta place prices – two of you should get out for £60 with a couple of drinks.

Cafés transform menus to reveal the many ways herbs can be used in cooking

A greenhouse on London’s Southbank is nurturing thousands of edible herbs to serve in summery dishes at Kenwood House.

Catering firm A Company of Cooks, which runs the Brewhouse restaurant at the English Heritage property, is celebrating a summer-long Herbfest of urban gardening.

Each venue where the company operates – including the Royal Opera House, The Garden Café at Regent’s Park and the Southbank Centre has been planted with miniature gardens or herb installations.

There’s a roof garden at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and nine allotments in nearby Queen’s Walk, created in consultation with herb expert Jekka McVicar.

Menus have been transformed to celebrate seasonal herbs: basil, bay, chives, dill, lavender, lemon



■ One of the dishes created by A Company of Cooks Picture: Lia Vittone
verbena, mint, oregano and rosemary.

Sitting on the lovely outdoor terrace at Kenwood last week, surrounded by planters of pungent herbs, we tried a delicious chicken with thyme and tabouleh, the classic combination of salmon with

dill, a Greek salad of heritage tomatoes, feta and oregano, and a light salad of seeds, shoots, leaves and fresh herbs.

Desserts included a delicate, creamy basil pannacotta, lavender shortbread and a star turn of a moist and moreish orange and lavender cake.

Company of Cooks’ Herbfest menu also includes rosemary lamb skewer, herb soufflé, lettuce, pea and mint soup, and asparagus salad with dill.

Food and Beverage manager at RHS Wisley, Laurent Trenga, says the aim is to let people know how little space is needed – even in an urban window box or terrace – to grow herbs and how delicious the results are.

“The idea is to show people how easy it is to grow herbs and to use them in food and how wonderfully they affect the flavour of what you prepare. Fresh herbs scream

summer like a glass of rosé wine and are a great way to make dishes sing. You can tear them into salads, crumble with salt to make rubs for meat, mix into butter, infuse with oil or grind into pesto.”

Desserts

He points out that herbs aren’t restricted to savoury dishes with bay leaves in trifle and a fruit cup made with gin, elderflower, lime, mint and soda on the menus.

“As a company, we are ingredients driven, what’s in season – what’s suitable for this time of year? Nothing makes you feel like summer as much as fresh herbs.”

Trenga, who hails from the south of France, says his own favourite dishes include the honey and lavender crème brûlée and the lavender lemonade.

“England is very open-minded

about food and keen to try less usual flavours like basil in a dessert but I must confess I was dubious about the lavender lemonade until I tried it.

“I grew up where it is grown and, although I like to smell it, I didn’t think you could use it this way, but the lemonade is delicate not overpowering, the basil in the panna cotta is refreshing and creamy and the orange and lavender cake one of my favourites.”

He finds Kenwood a special place, especially when the scent of the herbs wafts across the terrace.

“Sitting outside in the gentle air, people are drawn to the herbs, smelling them, touching them. Herbfest is really appropriate there.”

Bridget Galton

■ Herbfest runs until September 8.