



Summer style in bottles

Magnums of Provence rosé are all the rage, and with good reason

Trendy is rarely a word appropriate to happenings in the Sagues household – but there we were the other evening following one of the very latest fashions in wine drinking. And what might that be? Drinking Provence rosé from a magnum, of course.

If you believe the trade statistics, big bottle pale pink wine from the Mediterranean coast of France is the hottest thing to make summer cool. Sales of magnums are predicted to double this year to 60,000 – and a good proportion of them will be to Majestic customers, who buy very close to half of all the Provence rosé sold in the UK.

That's hardly surprising, given the choice offered to them. At the Majestic 2014 summer press tasting there were three pink magnums open, an impressive focal point of the generous Provence selection. Whichever store you go into, there should be approaching a dozen different bottles or magnums waiting to be bought for summer picnics, aperitifs, anytime cool drinking or to serve through most of a meal – the dry, refreshing style of these subtly coloured, serious and seriously enjoyable wines is broadly food friendly.

Provence rosé is a blend of classic Mediterranean red grapes – grenache, mourvèdre, syrah and cinsault are the main contenders – with occasionally the addition of a fragrant white such as vermentino. During winemaking the juice of the red grapes has minimum contact with the skins, keeping the colour to palest shell or salmon, and the best wines have an appealing intensity of flavour, discreetly fruity and often with a hint of salinity.



■ Vines and lavender: the taste and scent of Provence

There's a fair amount of bland, boring wine made too, to quench the thirst of the holidaymakers who throng the beaches from the Carmargue to Monaco, but UK importers are picky and avoid most of that.

But to return to the surge in magnum popularity. Does wine taste better from a bigger bottle? Very possibly yes, when the liquid in question is red and ageworthy – the larger container encourages slow, successful maturity. But Provence pink isn't intended to spend a long time in the cellar. Its magnums are about style rather than ageing, and why not go for that when the sun is shining?

Quaffability

The trend might also be good commercially for the growers. The six of us emptied the magnum, and also polished off most of another rosé-to-compare in 75cl format, not a huge consumption but rather more than the daily recommended maximum, for women certainly. Alcohol levels may not be intimidating, rarely topping 13 per cent, but the sheer quaffability of many Provence rosés means you should take care.

The magnum which graced my dining table, AIX 2013 (£20), came from Majestic, but very enjoyable as it was, it wasn't my favourite. That was the very, very pale M de Minuty 2013, bone dry but with an attractive backbone of delicate fruit, crunchy freshness and minerality – a classic. Catch it now in 75cl bottle, £10 instead of £15 until August 4 if you buy at least two, or in magnum, £25. Others from Majestic I particularly liked (all 75cl, 2013 vintage and mostly price for two bottles or more) are Château Pigoudet La Chapelle, £9.35; Vallée des Pins, £7.50 until August 4; Château Barthès, £11.05; and Miraval, £18 (£38 in magnum).

Another good source of Provence rosé is Jeroboams, which has the ultra-fashionable – and very good – Château d'Esclans Whispering Angel, bottle £15, magnum £37, plus more including Gavoty Tradition, £10 (the Esclans range is also at fromvineyardsdirect.com, no delivery charge on 12 bottles or more, Whispering Angel magnum £33).

And a final appealing, good-value high street wine is Domaine de la Navarre, M&S, £9.

Great pub grub with a legend of Fleet Street

Our reviewer finds plenty to praise when he has lunch with literary editor Graham Lord

I am perfectly accustomed to being out of kilter with most of my fellow Britons, whenever it comes to taste and predilections. I hate football. And tennis. Also cats, beer and tea. I have never owned a pair of trainers or a tracksuit – I have never even worn a T-shirt, never mind one with a slogan on it. Don't own a duvet. Never ridden a bicycle – and nor do I drive, or take the Tube. I have never wished to visit India, let alone Thailand. I did not vote for Tony Blair. I have never bought a Lottery ticket, nor bet on a horse. I find Jane Austen a complete and utter bore. Likewise Tolkien. I have never read a Harry Potter – I have never watched an episode of *EastEnders*. I do not think that Muhammad Ali is a god (he hit people in the face and now he's lost his mind – how great is that?). I don't own a Kindle. I write with a pen. I don't get Audrey Hepburn. I dislike Heinz Baked Beans. I actually have never ever

drunk from a mug. I do not tweet, or even text. I have never heard One Direction (but then I've never heard Take That) – and not for one moment did I ever wish to meet Nelson Mandela. Or the Dalai Lama. But one thing I do share with the huge majority of this country's population is a love of roast chicken. I noticed that I had been eating it a lot just lately, in various restaurants, as well as at home. I had it in Ronnie Scott's jazz club the other weekend (I don't like jazz either – it's a long story) and it was surprisingly good: the chicken, that is. I bought a freshly rotisserie corn-fed number from Waitrose, doing my best to ignore the Americanism printed on the bag: "Good to Go!" I bet the chicken didn't think that. What was not so easily passed over, however, was the following addendum: "Hot food for immediate consumption". Now I really did believe that this horrible and debilitating disease

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Joseph Connolly at The Driver



■ Joseph with Graham Lord at The Driver in King's Cross

Picture: Polly Hancock

had long ago been eradicated in this country, but here I was confronted with the means to contract it straight away...! More than worrying.

Groovy

So what with all the chicken, I vowed that in the next restaurant I visited, it would be red meat all the way. And that restaurant turned out to be The Driver, in King's Cross. This converted corner pub looks extraordinary – the entire building has been beautifully transformed into a vibrant green and red living vertical garden: groovy, and unique. The interior, to the untutored eye, is still a bit of a dump. The untutored eye will take in the bare floorboards, crumbling concrete pillars, black industrial bricks and the bar-top

seemingly roughly hewn from a tree, complete with bark. The untutored eye will fail to absorb the scumbled walls, expensively treated so as to look like stained and motley plaster. The carefully restored cornice and mantel, the artfully mismatched chairs ... and the clincher – Tom Dixon copper ball pendants: so King's Cross cool, then. The "driver" of the name is the fellow who directs the stags on moor and highland in the direction of the guns – the equivalent of a beater for fowl. And a stag makes an appearance on the menu, and a couple of mounted heads ponderously loom upon the walls (but no venison is offered to eat). There is also a large old sign advertising Jaguar cars ... so the driver in any way you want it, really.

My guest was Graham Lord, for more than 25 years a Fleet Street byword, when he was literary editor of the *Sunday Express* – in the days when the paper could boast not only a serious literary editor, but also a circulation of more than four million. During his time there he interviewed the most extraordinary roll call of authors and celebrities including PG Wodehouse, Margot Fonteyn, Eric Morecambe, Marianne Faithfull, Prince Charles, Jackie Collins, John Betjeman, Roald Dahl, Graham Greene ... oh God, on and on and on. He has written a memoir recalling them all, punningly entitled *Lord's Ladies and Gentlemen*. In addition, he has published nine novels and seven very successful biographies of people such as Arthur Lowe and

James Herriot. In his life of Dick Francis, he revealed that every one of his hugely popular racing thrillers had in fact been written by his wife. Graham currently divides his time between the West Indies and the South of France (huge sympathy all round, then) with the occasional foray into Putney. He is married to an artist, Juliet: they had lived together for 24 years, when finally he got down on one knee and said to her: "Look, I am 70 years old, and I have two questions for you. One: will you marry me?" She said yes. "Good. Now question two: do you think you could possibly help me up...?"

Bargain

There is no set lunch, but a plentiful carte: five starters, two "sharing platters", nine mains and 10 side dishes and snacky things. In my quest for red meat, my eye was drawn to a 15oz T-bone and chips – a bargain at £19.95. But a bit too huge, really ... so I ordered an 8oz chargrilled fillet with spinach salad and peppercorn sauce with extras of home-made chips and petit pois. Graham wanted beer-battered cod fillet with chips, tartare sauce and minted pea purée (mushy peas) – and we were both kicking off with seared queen scallops with Jerusalem artichoke purée, serrano ham and red pepper coulis. This was truly good: three large, plump and juicy scallops attractively presented atop the purée in a shell, a curl of excellent dry ham alongside. Pretty faultless. A jug of water on the table, with wedges of lemon and lime, and glasses of pinot grigio for Graham and a red vin de pays for me – the wine being very well priced at between £15.90 and £28 the bottle. "I have drunk alcohol," said Graham, "with every lunch and dinner, seven days a week, for nearly 50 years." He looks remarkably good on it. "Everyone thinks I must dye my hair, but I don't." He only recently swapped his trademark Hank Marvin glasses for much thinner rimless ones. "The others were so heavy. And they weren't Hank Marvin ... more early Michael Caine."

Graham's cod curled up from the

plate, like an inquisitive battered lobster. He said it was excellent, and so were the chips. And now to my red meat: my sole criticism was that it came on a chunk of plank instead of a plate ... but the steak, oh my God that steak ... it was the best and tenderest and juiciest steak I have had in quite possibly years: criss-cross charred to perfection, and precisely pink ... simply wonderful. As were the fresh peas, soft spinach leaves and first rate peppercorn sauce: not too peppery, just so. Chips were not quite great, which was a minor pity. Then we shared a very good pecan pie with Chantilly cream. Graham told me that he didn't think he could live in England again, because it is no longer his England. "I don't think Cameron is a true Conservative," he said. "If I had a vote, it would be for Ukip. This was a very good lunch. Graham Greene once said to me that every restaurant meal is either a novel, or a story." Well ... I'm not sure that this was really either, though I did hope it might at least make a decent article. The Driver is a very good place indeed – with friendly and efficient service to boot. I hailed a taxi outside, and I said to the driver, "Hey driver – I've just been to a rather great little restaurant, and it's named after you...!" "Really?" he said. "What – Cyril...?"

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *Boys and Girls*, is published by Quercus. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

■ THE DRIVER

2-4 Wharfedale Road, N1
Tel: 020 7278 8827

■ Open Monday-Friday, noon-midnight; Saturday, 6pm-midnight. Closed Sunday.

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Pretty reasonable for the quality. About £95 for a three-course meal for two with wine.



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