

The Sag Harbor Express

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A Rosé by Any Other Name....Or Number



Jay McInerney at the rosé tasting in Sag Harbor on Friday, July 26. (photo: billy farrell agency)

By Annette Hinkle

Here's a confession. I've never been a big fan of rosé.

There... it's out. I've said it.

Chalk up my ambivalence to the discovery of bold reds on a trip to Europe in the early 1990s, or perhaps the disturbingly sweet white zinfandels which found their way to our kitchen table in Ohio on those rare "special occasions" when my mom felt we were being fancy (usually when company was in the house).

In any case, the pink stuff never did it for me. My philosophy has long been, “why bother with something pink when you can instead turn to a lovely Sancerre or a bright Prosecco?”

Still, there’s been all this buzz about rosé in recent years. People I know and admire seem to be seeking it out and even the *Wall Street Journal* ran a Hamptons summer wine story over the weekend in which rosé figured prominently.

So I could hardly pass up a blind rosé tasting offered by author Jay McInerney last Friday at the model apartment of Watchcase, the luxury condo development currently under construction at the former Bulova Watchcase Factory in Sag Harbor.

Though he’s best known for his novels like “Bright Lights, Big City,” McInerney has garnered quite a reputation in recent years as a wine writer namely for his regular column in *The Wall Street Journal*.

His book “The Juice” is all about wine from around the world and consists of essays mainly culled from his *WSJ* columns. Included are chapters on Ted Conklin’s wine cellar at The American Hotel and another comparing Long Island rosés with those from Provence.

Friday’s tasting was just that — and it pitted two rosés from Provence against two from Long Island. Not only was it a chance to hang out for a little while in the apartment with the best view in the village (two bedrooms for \$4 million, rooftop garden included), but also an opportunity to delve into the mysterious world of rosé.

Guests sampled all four contenders which were offered from numbered decanters. Surprisingly, their hue ranged from a very dark pink to one offering so pale it could pass for white.

McInerney is a kindred spirit when it comes to suspicion of rosés and his experience with the sweet stuff was similar to mine. In his book, he notes his first purchase of rosé came when he was a teenager trying to impress a date by buying a bottle of Mateus, that cheap fizzy Portuguese version which came in what McInerney calls a “Buddha-shaped bottle.”

“I sniffed the cork and nodded to the waiter,” said McInerney who read from his book as the Watchcase crowd sampled the various rosés.

When the four wines tasted were revealed, they turned out to be Bedell Cellar’s dark pink Taste Rosé (\$20), Chateau Miravel’s “Pink Floyd” (\$23) from Provence (the vineyard is partly owned by Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie), Wölffer Rosé (\$16) and Domaines Ott —the nearly white rosé from Provence with the large price tag of \$40.

While it was hard to judge the actual winner based on the casual raising of hands, all four rosés had definite fans — and many people expressed delight at the complexity of the Long Island offerings.

The sentiment comes as no surprise to Roman Roth, winemaker at Wölffer Estate Vineyard who was a pioneer in the production of rosé on the East End.

“I came here in '92. We were looking at ripening merlot and it was a difficult year,” recalls Roth. “I came in August when the Hampton Classic was going on. You could tell it was a summer area, so I thought, let’s make a rosé.”

As a result, the vineyard produced one of the first dry rosés on Long Island. Still, Roth initially faced an uphill battle when it came to people’s perceptions about rosé.

“White zinfandel and blush were more fashionable,” says Roth. “But we stuck our neck out with the dry rose. And people tasted it — finally, it has worked out.”

In his chapter “Rosé from Long Island to Provence,” McInerney jokingly imagines those early days when Roth and the late Christian Wölffer (with their German accents) told visitors “Ve must insist you try our rosé.”

Roth notes that while Provence might be the place for rosé in France, Long Island is giving Europe a run for its money. And there are a number of reasons why.

“It’s the climate — the soil, the breezes and our cool temperatures makes for elegant wines,” says Roth. “We’re on the same latitude of Madrid and Naples. So the sun is stronger than Provence. It’s a very long and slow ripening, that, and the acidity of the soil helps make for a great wine. That extra vibrancy and natural acidity is the edge.”

Today, there’s no need to plead to get people to give it a try. Wölffer’s rosé is one of their most popular vintages and it flies off the shelves.

“We have 500 cases – it will be gone in another two weeks,” says Roth. “I think we make more rosé than every other Long Island winery combined.

Instead of single grape variety, Roth uses a blend in Wölffer rosé.

“I like balance, he says. “If you could find balance in life, it would be great. We use 69 percent merlot, 16.5 percent chardonnay 5 percent cabernet sauvignon, 5 percent pinot noir and 4.5 percent cabernet franc.”

“That’s worked quite well as a way to bring in different flavors, freshness, fruitiness and acidity,” he says. “It’s a nice, complex elegant wine.”

When asked why it suddenly seems rosé is all the rage, Roth says, “It takes momentum. It started as a snowball and keeps rolling. People drink a huge amount of rose. Now it’s common.”

“In the United States it had to do with not being comfortable with tasting things out of the norm,” he adds. “Rosé had the sweet stigma of cheap wine.”

“Real men drink rosé, and we became associated with it.”

Roth notes another reason for rosé’s popularity has to do with its versatility.

“You can have it with lobster, meat, turkey with Thanksgiving dinner, cheeses,” he says. “It goes with any food – or without any food at all.”

“It’s great for the weather and great for the style,” he adds.

It’s also great with friends, especially when you’re sitting on the roof deck of an awesome apartment in Sag Harbor, which is where I spent Friday night watching the sunset and enjoying a fine glass of Wölffer Rosé ...or was it number 4?