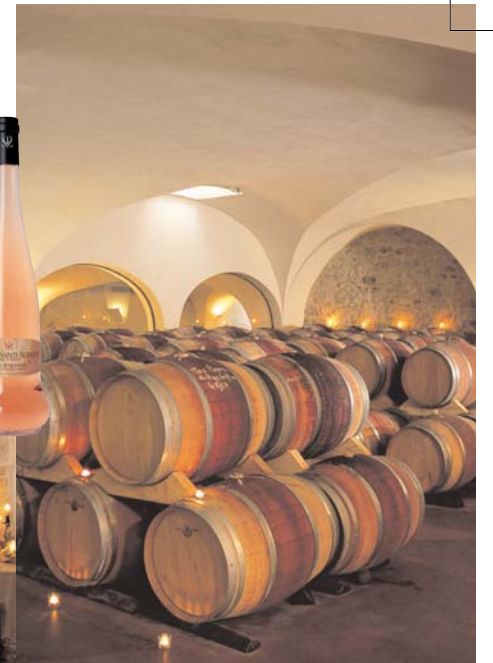


TIME OUT

By Debra Moffitt



Sunshine in a bottle

Autumn is the ideal season for wine buffs in search of the nectar of the gods. Just follow the "Route des Vins" to Château Sainte Roseline.

Jean-Jacques Benetti, Director of the "Maison des Vins", says that the region of Provence produces only dry rosés, never sweet ones, and they tend to be aromatic, supple and complex. Rosés constitute 80% of the area's production and the "appellation" "Côtes de Provence" also accounts for 80% of all wines sold in Provence (which include Coteaux d'Aix and Coteaux Varois). This is the only area of France where rosés have become "crus classés" (high grade wines), with some exported internationally.

■ CIVP - Maison des Vins, Les Arcs-sur-Argens, Le Var (04 94 99 50 20).
 ■ Consult the website www.vinsdeprovence.com for a comprehensive list of the region's vineyards.

Drinking rosé is a quintessential South-of-France experience. At a café in Draguignan, the rosé glistens as the waiter pours it into the glass, bold and fruity, alive with energy and the promise of a taste of sunshine. This *Côte de Provence* wine magically complements a *salade niçoise*, Cavaillon melon with *prosciutto* ham, black olive *tapenade*, Mediterranean rock fish, even the local goat's cheese and peach mousse with meringue and raspberry sauce. When the last drop trickles out of the oddly shaped bottle, the label provides a name, *Lampe de Méduse*, and an estate, the Château Sainte Roseline. The waiter points down the road, saying it's only a few kilometers to the *Maison des Vins* and they will know the way. The quest is on to find some of this sunny elixir to take home and savour in the dark, chilly months of winter. The *Route des Vins* invites you to discover some of over 600 vineyards - and the possibility of viewing a Saint first hand! Cajoled by the Mistral wind and drenched with sunlight a record 3,000 hours per year, the region produces a vast array of reds, whites and rosés infused with the flavours and fragrances of Provence: sun, lavender, eucalyptus, chalky limestone soil and salty sea breezes. It also offers stunning scenery from the mountains to coastal areas such as Bandol, one of the oldest *appellations* in France, dating

back to the 16th-17th centuries. Many estates are open to visitors, including renowned ones like La Bastide Blanche, Château Mirval, La Frégate and Les Domaines Ott, which sell some of the priciest wines around with certain rosés exceeding 30 euros a bottle. Your first stop on the route is the *Côtes de Provence Maison des Vins* in Les Arcs near Draguignan. It offers a wealth of information, free wine-tasting 7 days a week during much of the year, and the chance to buy wines from more than 420 producers in the area at the same prices as on the estates. The selection of 16 wines for tasting changes weekly and includes wines from five areas: the highlands, the Sainte-Victoire Mountain, the Beausset basin, the coast and the inland valleys. The *Maison des Vins* also provides addresses and directions, as well as half-day initiation courses in wine tasting. The neophyte first tastes water flavoured with salt, citric acid, tannins and sugar to recognize sweet, salty and acid flavours, then moves on to olfactory tests to identify aromas like fruits, woods and berries. In air-conditioned luxury behind the circular bar, *sommeliers* offer advice on the best buys depending on individual taste. Grape varieties range from light, peppery *grenache*, *cinsault* and *tibouren* for the dry rosés to *syrah*, *mourvèdre* and *cabernet sauvignon* for the reds. Whites are often made from *rolle* and *semillon*

grapes. Tastes vary considerably depending on the soil, the micro-climate and whether the wines are aged in oak or stainless steel casks. Around half of France's rosés are made under the *Côtes de Provence* label, which covers about 45,000 acres of diverse landscapes. The Domaine d'Esclans, a white from La Motte, a Domaine de Siouvette red and "Cuvée Marcel Galfard" made by one of the rare women producers at La Mole near Saint-Tropez, are examples of the wines proposed for tastings. A gourmet restaurant at the *Maison des Vins* has a menu with local Provençal specialties, while a second restaurant offers a *plat du jour*. Armed with an initiated palate and better knowledge of the wines, you can then head to the Château Sainte Roseline, 3 km from Les Arcs, to discover its wines and visit the ancient chapel and monastery. At harvest time, the vineyards hang heavy with sweet grapes. Their warm, sugary scent fills the air: bunches of *syrah* and *grenache* ripen, cicadas hum and a warm breeze stirs the olive-trees. Gorged with juice, the grapes wear their deep purple robes in the brilliant Provençal light so cherished by Van Gogh, Picasso and Cézanne. Sainte Roseline's owner, Bernard Teillaud, intends to make the 270-acre property a star in the region. With seven centuries of wine-making behind it, this estate

is already one of the most exceptional. The beautiful 12th-century chapel and abbey were founded by a hermit named Roubaud who considered that the area's beauty, serenity and natural springs made it a perfect retreat from the world. Roseline was the daughter of the Marquis de Villeneuve, Lord of Les Arcs. Renowned for her generosity and piety, she died in 1329 and was later canonized. Her body was exhumed five years later and found to be perfectly preserved. She can now be seen, lying at rest in a glass case in the chapel: dressed in a nun's habit, her face, hands and feet remain visible and miraculously well preserved. Pilgrims come from all over the world to celebrate her Saint Day on January 17th. Marc Chagall's *Angels' Feast* mosaic and other fine works of art also decorate the Romanesque chapel. Though most of the cloister is closed to the public, tours in English and French present the Château's history and techniques used in wine production. At the end of the tour, the *Lampe de Méduse* bottle finally appears in the cellar. This unusually shaped bottle contains one of the Château's prize-winning wines. The rosé stands limpid and brilliant in the glass. It smells aromatic and tastes fresh, refined and intense. The record 3,000 hours of sunshine ends up here at the end of the season - pressed into a bottle.

The imposing Sainte Roseline estate, where century-old plane trees line the paths, has a natural spring that contributes to the quality of its "crus classés" wines (one of only 18 other "crus classés" in the region). Open 7 days a week for wine tasting, the vaulted cellar with its stone fireplace offers a welcome refuge to thirsty travellers. The Château also hosts jazz and classical concerts combined with sumptuous dinners and frequent art exhibits, like one recently dedicated to sculptor Arman.

■ Château Sainte Roseline, Les Arcs-sur-Argens, Le Var (04 94 99 51 53/50 30). www.sainte-roseline.com

Photos: Courtesy Château Sainte Roseline - F. Millot/CIP