

Robert Camuto: Letter From Europe

A Deeper Shade of Pink

Bandol's Château de Pibarnon swims against the tide of rosé lite



Photo by: Robert Camuto

A more manly rosé: Eric de Saint Victor in a vineyard that he uses for his concentrated, 100 percent Mourvèdre Nuances cuvée.

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It's summertime, which can mean firing up the grill, switching off the brain, and pouring lots of rosé—sometimes even over ice.

The world has developed a thirst for highly quaffable, ultrapale rosé, and Provence is its main supplier. By today's fashion, the lighter the better. (See my blog post on how research into aesthetic preferences has shaded the color of Provence rosé.)

Now, I don't mean to be a Provence party pooper, but I want to talk about a smaller school of winemakers—let's call them rosé resisters—who are bucking the trend by making darker, more substantial and complex rosés.

One noteworthy resister is Eric de Saint Victor of Château de Pibarnon in Bandol—the small coastal appellation neighboring the much larger Côtes de Provence. Since 2000, when he took over his family's stunningly gorgeous 130-acre spread high in the hills above the Mediterranean coast, he has focused not just on Bandol's flagship powerful reds, but on rich rosés meant to stand up to the local cuisine's strong flavors, like garlic, saffron, anchovies, sea urchin and roast peppers.

"In Côtes de Provence the higher up you go [in price], the lighter the wine—to where it's almost a white," says the blue-eyed Saint Victor, 52, from a hilltop vineyard on a breezy early summer day. "In Bandol, that's not our way. In Bandol we are used to looking for concentration—even in rosé."

The Saint Victors are relative newcomers here. Saint Victor's father, the late Count Henri de Saint Victor, was a Normandy native and Paris pharmaceutical company researcher. In 1978, he came to Bandol with his wife, Catherine. The couple was wowed by a bottle of Pibarnon red at lunch, visited the rustic, struggling estate, and bought it. They soon moved from Paris and started a mid-life adventure, earning the respect of local vintners.

Bandol is shaped by Mourvèdre—no wallflower variety. The tannic, earthy, temperamental and late-ripening grape, synonymous with the appellation's burly reds, is also used in varying degrees in the region's rosés, typically tempered with Grenache and Cinsault.

While some Bandol producers have lowered their Mourvèdre content to approximate the increasingly popular Provençal style, Saint Victor has taken his winery in the opposite direction. Pibarnon's main rosé—two-thirds Mourvèdre rounded out by Cinsault—is a deep salmon color in the classic Bandol style. The newly released 2015 vintage (\$30) scored 92 points, or outstanding, on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale.

Since the 2014 vintage, Saint Victor has doubled down on the intensity scale and on Mourvèdre in a small-edition, pure Mourvèdre rosé bottling called Nuances. In a tasting of this debut effort (90 points, \$35) *Wine Spectator* senior editor James Molesworth called it a "broad, juicy, almost muscular style of rosé."

"I felt we had to respond to the Côtes de Provence rosé," Saint Victor says. "I wanted to do a special cuvée to show what we could do with Mourvèdre—to make a *grand* rosé for the table. For me, it was necessary."

To make Nuances, Saint Victor took unusual care, working with about 2 acres of the estate's highest-altitude and oldest Mourvèdre, about 50 years in age. His standard rosé is a blend of juice pressed immediately and from the saignée method, fermented on selected yeasts in steel and enamel-lined cement vats. In contrast, the juice for Nuances macerates eight hours on its skins before pressing. The must is fermented by wild yeasts in one large Stockinger oak cask, as well as several clay Italian amphorae.

Though a total of 375 cases are bottled in June, the wine is not released until early fall—a statement that this is more than a summer drink.

"It's a winter rosé," says Saint Victor with a laugh. "Mourvèdre takes time to open. The idea of Nuances is to convince people who don't think rosé is really wine."

Well, I drink a lot of wine and, after 15 summers in Provence, have consumed lots of rosé—much of it instantly forgettable.

Pibarnon's rosés are not forgettable. They are very much real wines that cry out for food—not ice cubes.

Nuances is a wine with more body and structure than most rosé. The yet-to-be-released 2015 showed brighter acidity and less trace of oak than the debut 2014 vintage.

"Mourvèdre is masculine," says Saint Victor, "and I wanted to make a rosé that was masculine, like Gary Cooper—masculine, but elegant."