

Taming of the Bestial Bandol

MARCH 18, 2014

Wines of The Times

By ERIC ASIMOV

Wine is so often typecast. Rosé belongs to the summer, and zinfandel, the all-American wine, to Thanksgiving. We drink white wine with fish.

Resorting to such reflexes is understandable. Wine can be confusing, and taking refuge in simple guidelines offers security. But the guidelines, though not exactly wrong, are too limiting.

Rosé does go well with warm weather, and most rosés are too ephemeral to last past the autumn equinox. Still, some rosés benefit from aging and are complex enough to warrant year-round enjoyment. Zinfandel does logically pair with Thanksgiving, even if the feast, which cries out for nimble, versatile wines, is not served by most big, burly zinfandels. White wine with fish? Not always. What's better than salmon with pinot noir?

Similarly, Bandol, the great red of Provence, is a superb winter wine, the colder and stormier the weather the better. But it can be just as good the rest of the year, especially if you love Bandol.

Times Topic: Wines of The Times

Bandol is a great wine with a hearty stew or roast in front of the fire. But it may also be wonderful with a pot of chili or a roast chicken as summer days stretch long. Most wines are far more adaptable and flexible than imagined. And seasonality is overrated. More important are mood, food and context.



Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

As a Bandol lover, I won't restrict myself to those chilly nights that seem so perfect for the wine. The inclination to seek out Bandol whenever and wherever I can was reinforced by a wine panel tasting of 18 bottles from recent vintages. We found wines that were so wonderfully distinctive, and of such generally high quality, that we would drink them anytime. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by John Ragan, the wine director for Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group, and Jessica Brown, wine director for the Breslin and the John Dory Oyster Bar.

Bandol belies the image of Provence as solely the province of oceans of rosé. It is made mostly from the mourvèdre grape, grown largely on south-facing terraces inland from the fishing port of Bandol, between Marseilles and Toulon. The rules require the wines to be at least 50 percent mourvèdre, to be supplemented by grenache, cinsault and a few other grapes. Still, some producers make wine almost entirely of mourvèdre.

No. 1: Château de Pibarnon Bandol 2010



The wine tends to be tough in its youth, with an almost feral intensity, conveying the notion of a wild grape and landscape that won't be tamed by a winemaker's bag of tricks. With their staunch grip on identity and terroir, the best Bandols refuse to accede to contemporary winemaking's importuning to be easy, accessible and friendly. Indeed, good Bandol needs time. While our selection ranged from 2011 back to 2007, I would say that every bottle in our top 10 would benefit from more aging. They can be enjoyed young — even the 2011s won't be offensive. But, as with Barolo or Bordeaux, a good 10 years of aging will soften the brutishness, revealing many more facets within.

Bandol is a small appellation. We could only find 18 bottles instead of our usual 20. But the wines were superb, whether old-fashioned and rustic in style or modern, which in Bandol means polished rather than flashy and oaky. Regardless, predominant flavors include dark fruits, licorice, herbs, tobacco and earth. If you shy away from overly fruity wines, like flamboyant Châteauneuf-du-Papes from warm vintages, Bandols offer excellent, more savory alternatives.

Tasting Report

Château de Pibarnon, \$36, *** ½

Bandol 2010

Pure, smooth and harmonious, with complex, lingering flavors of dark fruit, earth and herbs. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)