

Ring around the rosés

A summer wave is about to wash on to the market – sweet, pink and plentiful.

Drinks

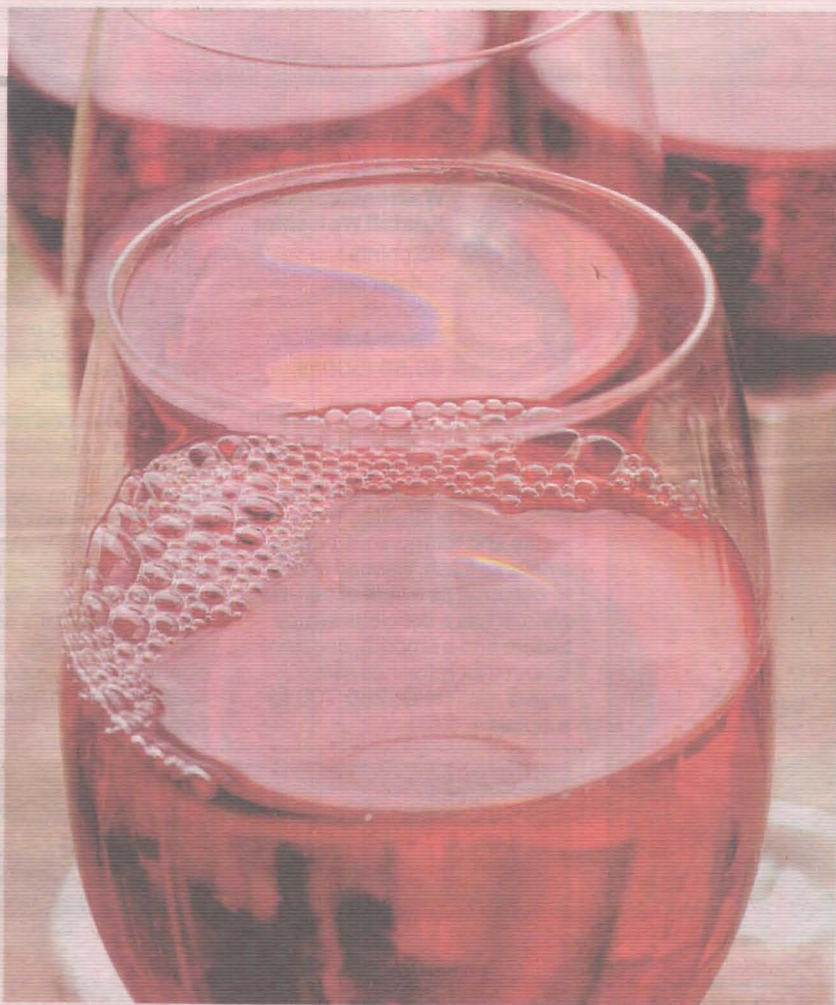
Philip White

IN this business, as surely as summer leads to vintage, spring leads to rosé. Or stories about rosé. I reckon a lot of it's wishful thinking. Rosé photographs well in the gastroporn glossies, but the snaps don't always lead to sales.

Since Rockford's Robert O'Callaghan launched his Alicante Bouchet in the mid-'80s, quickly carving out a rock-steady niche in the Adelaide market, other winemakers have followed with various forms of rosé which seem to retain their meagre space on the shelves, and there are many others who come and go.

But apart from the '70s rosé explosion, which came to an abrupt end when it became unfashionable to drink pink for fear someone might think you were drinking the sweet Mateus from Portugal, exactly why the rosy wave repeats is a mystery.

Henri Krug, the great champagne maker, once told me he thought the popularity of pink champagne was determined by the British royal family. The abdicating Duke of Windsor and his Wallace kicked off a wave of pink, Henri said, which had gone completely by the time the present royals were grown. Then Lady Di was a fan – I reckon Elton John taught her, as he has long been addicted



Picture: GRANT NOWELL

to the glorious Louis Crystal pink – and suddenly we saw every major fizz house producing pink. That wave is still to recede.

But, in this corner of the world, where rosé generally has no bubbles, there hasn't been any obvious example or excuse for a boom in rosé production or sales.

Until now. Led by a few enlightened wizards from small affairs in cool Victoria, we're beginning to see some ultra-cool rosés, from bone-dry to dry-ish. Start with the exquisite potions from Castagna, Scorpo, Fairbank, Taltarni and Dominique Portet.

It's not just cooler growing conditions which make these wines special. Factors ranging from shiraz, pinot and other varieties, more intelligent blending, even organics and biodynamics, variously contribute to their loveliness.

But, as in previous fads, the market's also flooding with very dull, mean, acidulous but sugary rosés from the hotter industrial grapeyards. No matter what they'd have you believe, this is NOT the work of brilliant marketers.

After the bouillabaisse cafes of Marseille, Australia must be the best place on Earth to drink good, crunchy rosé but, wine writers aside, no effort has ever been made to build a market. Too poofy.

Tesco, the huge British food and booze chain, may take some blame for this new stirring of the rosy waters by revealing that their rosé sales increased by 50 per cent in one year. So reports De Bortoli's winemaker, Steve Webber.

"Could this be a trend that will be followed once summer turns up the heat?" he ponders in his latest press release. If only.

"We find the rosé market is changing after a period of obscurity," he continues rather hopefully. He speaks of "growing support", of "steady growth" and new releases. Hang on a mo. There are many millions of litres of excess refinery red slowly falling

apart in Australia's tank farms. Nobody wants it. A huge amount of it is cabernet sauvignon.

So? Funny that. Most of these new-release rosés are cabernet sauvignon. We won't drink it all as a dark red, so they're making white or pink cabernet by squashing the juice off the skins before it colours or picks up any flavour.

Otherwise, they simply bleach or centrifuge the colour out of it.

I can never understand who decided cabernet should be drunk as a straight variety. It rarely works. Cabernet's lean and green and needs flesh, from shiraz or merlot. Make it straight, but white, rosy, or pink, and you've got all those green leafy bits of the cab without a hint of the comforting flesh that the stuff was crying out for right from the start.

So they give it texture by adding sugar or grape juice, or leaving it only partly fermented.

The excuse for this is the success of those cult slurps such as Rockford's Alicante Bouchet, which is very sweet and very popular, if misspelled and surprisingly like grenache. (It should read "bouschet".) Rockford's neighbours, like Charlie Melton and Turkey Flat, have followed in this wine's sugary wake for years with rosés made from grenache. Nothing wrong with that. They're popular. But they're not made in the mega volumes that are towering over us now like a huge tsunami of pink sugar, hovering there while the marketing geniuses work out a way of frocking it up.

Do yourself a springtime favour. Track down those dry, cool Victorians. Buy a smoked mackerel at the market and warm it, flesh down, skin up, over smouldering cedar chips. Get a healthy Greek salad into the bowl, a bottle or two in the ice bucket and slide straight into the serious pink, no sugar.