



Rosés by any other name

JOHN STIMPIG reports on Sacha Lichine's bold Provençal venture

When Sacha Lichine sold Château Prieuré-Lichine in 1999, he was in several minds what to do next. Given his lineage as the son of the great vintner and writer Alexis Lichine, one might have expected him to stake another claim in Bordeaux or even Burgundy. 'But they both have so much history, it would take three generations to do something dramatic,' says Lichine. 'So I decided to look at regions where I could really make a difference on the fine wine stage – and sooner rather than later.'

That might explain why he picked Côtes de Provence, but it doesn't entirely explain why he focused his attention on making rosé. After all, it might be the flavour of the month, but it's hardly got a reputation for gravitas at the fine and rare end of the spectrum.

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Yet this was precisely the challenge that Lichine was searching for. 'The world doesn't need another great red wine,' he points out. 'So why not try and create the world's best rosé and prove that it can be taken seriously.'

After prospecting around the region for several years, he finally struck gold in 2006 when he purchased the run-down

Château d'Esclans for €12 million. Its 267ha (hectares) are planted with Rolle, Grenache and some Syrah. 'It has everything,' says Lichine. 'A great terroir, old vines and fantastic exposure and microclimate. The potential was huge.'

So too were his plans. First he brought in no less a winemaker than Patrick Leon, formerly of Mouton-Rothschild. Then he lavished €3.5 million on the vineyards and cellars. Most notably, he has equipped the vat room with individually temperature-controlled wooden barrels. 'It's worth the investment. The cellars have helped us to realise our vision.'

In the vineyard, there's just as much attention to detail. 'We hand-harvest in tiny *cajettes* and only in the morning, to keep the grapes cool,' adds Lichine. They also use a very Bordelais triage system for sorting the fruit. Naturally, only the very best grapes make the cut.

Two estate wines are made in the form of Château d'Esclans, as well as the more commercial Whispering Angel. In addition, Lichine has also separated two old vine parcels and created a pair of 'Burgundian-style' rosés called Les Clans and the top of the range Garrus. Fascinatingly, both these wines get the full Côte d'Or treatment in terms of new oak barrel fermentation and *bâtonnage*.

The wines show great finesse, complexity and depth. 'With Les Clans, I wanted to produce premier cru quality,' says Lichine. 'For Garrus, I want it to be the Corton-Charlemagne of rosé,' he adds. Having tasted his 2006 Garrus, I can reveal he's on the right track.

These wines represent something of a paradigm shift for top-end rosé and,

and, when you see the price of the 2005s, they are going to look very cheap indeed. I tasted them and they are nothing short of liquid dynamite. At around £2,800/US\$5,500 a case (in bond) they are well worth a look.

UPCOMING AUCTIONS

UK

Bonham's, London

9 July (Fine & rare wines)
+44 (0) 20 7393 3900

Christie's, London

14 July (Fine wines & vintage port)
+44 (0) 20 7839 9060

Sotheby's, London

23 July (Fine & rare wines)
+44 (0) 20 7293 5000

US

The Chicago Wine Company

30 July (Wine)
+1 630 594 2972

All dates are subject to change

perhaps not surprisingly, they are priced accordingly. Only 160 cases of Garrus were produced from its debut vintage. At £60 per bottle, it is more than twice the price of Domaines Ott's rosés. 'Of course, people scream and yell about the price,' says Lichine. 'But it costs a lot of money to make great wine from old vines, especially the way we do it. Once you taste the wine, most people agree that there's nothing like it.' All of which might explain why the Garrus 2006 sold out in just three weeks.

Despite his early success, the endeavour remains a massive gamble for Lichine. It remains to be seen if, and how, these extraordinary wines will age, and also whether he can single-handedly reposition rosé as a serious drink for collectors and connoisseurs. That's clearly a very tough call. But it's also worth remembering what his father achieved in Bordeaux and Burgundy half a century ago. Can his son pull off something similar in the South of France? We'll just have to wait and see. **D**

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TAKE A TIP FROM THE TRADE

DAVID WAINWRIGHT, FINE & RARE WINE CONSULTANT

As the Rhône becomes ever more popular, its best wines are becoming excellent investments. Guigal's three single-vineyard Côte Rôties, **La Mouline**, **La Landonne** and **La Turque**, from 1998, are all highly rated. Production is tiny