A Nichols Worth of Wine

May 2007

Bonjour Viens Provence

Greetings from Provence! Everything you've ever imagined about this magical area of the world is true and more. *Printemps* – spring, is in the air here and the wildflowers are in full bloom, the skies and Mediterranean are as "*azur"* as the name implies and the vineyards enjoy the warm sunshine and cool evenings. Although this is my first trip to Provence, I am feeling a little nostalgic as it reminds me of the years I lived near the vineyards of Northern California almost three decades ago when one had the sense that you were about to witness a tremendous change.

As the legendary "Mistral" winds forge their way down the Rhone Valley, where the mountains meet the sea, a sense of excitement and vitality is ushering in a new era to this twenty-six centuries old winegrowing region. Not unlike Napa Valley thirty years ago when small vineyards lined both sides of Highway 29 from Carneros to Calistoga, the *Vins of Provence* can be seen everywhere just north of Nice and west to Bandol and beyond.

It is no secret that the French winegrowing community has awakened to the sleeping giant of New World wines. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Provence, where a new breed of vintner and winemaker has challenged virtually every aspect of century's old winemaking practices. Most no longer use the concrete fermenting tanks, they are reducing yields and are tearing out the once dominant varietals and replanting with grapes like syrah and grenache.

These are younger, passionate winemakers focused on quality over quantity and committed to demonstrating that Provence is about more than Rose` – admittedly still the backbone of their production. After weeks of tasting the wines and visiting the vineyards, I have learned that I do like Rose` after all, especially as it is made here; decidedly drier, fresher and more flavorful than any I've ever had, and secondly, that Provence is making red wines (known here as *rouge*) of incredible character and whites of grace and elegance. With few exceptions, Bandol certainly being one, the wines of this region are not "collectibles" as in classic first-growth Bordeaux or great vintage Burgundies; they can and do improve with some aging, but for the most part the majority of Provence wines are meant to be enjoyed while they are relatively young and fresh.

Admittedly, I have been blessed with the opportunity to enjoy a lot of wine in my life and career, so it is always a surprise and a genuine treat when I find wines made from grapes I have not only ever tasted, but never heard of! Fabulous reds made from braquet and folle noire grapes of the Bellet appellation in the foothills above Nice and exquisite whites from the widely planted rolle grape throughout the hills and valleys of Provence. While mouvedre is still the dominant red grape of the area, there are increased plantings of grenache, syrah and cabernet sauvignon and substantial grafting to the white varietals of sauvignon blanc, viognier, riesling and muscat is being undertaken.

The wines of Provence today are considerably less "rustic" than even a decade ago, but the classic *Provence* flavors are evident in every bottle – original, as uniquely varied as the soil in which they're grown, and as full of character as the people who grow and produce them.

Unfortunately, and not unlike what has happened in the California wine regions, tremendous tracts of this incredibly fertile land is being supplanted with the construction of new villas. Hopefully farmers and the dedicated people at *Vins de Provence*, the region's professional council to preserve and promote the distinctive viticultural uniqueness of Provence, will find a way to successfully balance modern urbanization with the preservation of this, the world's most historical wine growing region.

After driving the back country roads – many of them numerous times as I was lost more often than not – and traipsing through acres of vines, I am convinced that the wines of Provence are destined to stand beside the more recognized vineyards to their north and justifiably compete in the global wine market. Provence wines are not easy to find in America. There is tremendous competition. As a wine-buying public, we are obsessed with ratings and what the "experts" tell us we should be drinking, but if you want to experience wines that truly reflect the sun, soil and character of this remarkable land, the wines of Provence should be on your shopping list.

Chateau Sainte Roseline

After working my way through just half of the three distinct regions of Provence vineyards, I found no one winery more committed to the winds of change than Bernard Teillaud's, Chateau Sainte Roseline in Les Arcs – Sur Argens. That is not to say that Monsieur Teillaud is alone in redefining the wines of Provence, there are too many to mention in this issue, but the dedication, passion, and the all important deep-pockets and the willingness to invest the required resources to produce world-class wine was so overwhelmingly evident at Chateau Sainte Roseline, that for me, they stood out among their peers.

The chateau dates back to the tenth century and Roseline, the Mother Superior of the abbey in the early 14th century, after who the estate is named, was sanctified by Pope John XXII, and lies in rest in a glass case in the vineyard's chapel. In addition to the historical significance of the property, it is a renowned center of art and culture with a remarkable floor-to-ceiling mosaic by Chagall, depicting the *Angel's Meal*, stained glass by Bazaine and Giacometti sculptures.

But it is in the vineyards today that perhaps suggests the greatest chapter in the chateau's history. Wines have been cultivated on this property for more than 700 years and it has been designated a *Cru Classe* vineyard since 1955. There are more than 100 hectares (250 acres) of producing vineyards planted to 11 grape varieties and when I visited, they had just begun cultivation of another large plot at the domaine as well as having recently purchased an additional 70 hectare vineyard 10 kilometers away.

With the typical abundance of Provence sunshine – up to 3000 hours annually in some micro-climates, and an underground spring providing nourishment to the vines, the grapes of their premium line wines are hand-selected and moved to fermentation tanks by gravity through the three level cellar to preserve the quality of the berries. The blending and aging process, managed by winemaker, Christophe Bernard, of the one million bottle production, results in wines of immense Provencal character – reds that are concentrated and balanced, whites that are textured and complex and rose` wines that are fresh and seductive – and all very food friendly!

Chateau Sainte Roseline produces a portfolio of five lines of wine and all in the three colors of Provence – red, white and rose`. Three are proprietal and two are in conjunction with partners.

The "*Cuvee Prieure"* line, the "jewel of their production", features a red that is a blend of 70% syrah, cabernet and I think a little mourvedre. Flavors of dark red fruit and spices, it is drinking beautifully now but has a backbone of tannins to suggest the benefit of only a few years of aging. The white, a 2005 vintage made from the indigenous rolle grape, is richly textured from the French oak barrel aging, hence the vanilla overtones to the peach and pear flavors. I loved this intriguing wine. On one hand familiar, but on the other, with a subtle difference I had never experienced in a white wine. The rose`, a salmon-colored blend of mourvedre and syrah, was incredibly balanced with fruit redolent of strawberry and grapefruit, and had the acidity to pair beautifully with a filet of St. Pierre fish I picked up from the local Poissonnerier (fishmonger).

The *"Lampe de Meduse"* line, notable for both its value – priced slightly below the Prieure wines – and for the uniquely shaped bottle that has the top portion of the glass shaped typical of an Alsatian wine, while the bottom was designed to model a perfume bottle. Interesting, but more importantly, the wine in this unusual bottle was superb! The white, again predominantly from the rolle grape also had a blend of semillon and another grape I was completely unfamiliar with, clairette. A little more herbal, no doubt from the semillon. The rose' produced yet another new grape for me, tibouren, a sweet, soft-skinned problematic grape that is not only indigenous to Provence, but then only to certain coastal areas. Cinsault, mourvedre and syrah also comprise the blend. The Lampe de Meduse red is currently based on the carignan grape, which may be uprooted in vintages to come and is a deep, darkly colored wine with powerful, dark fruit flavors.

The *"Barons de Sainte Roseline"* the premier offering of their production was unfortunately sold out and none available to me on my visit. I was told that this line was undergoing a name change to *"Chapelle Sainte Roseline"* in the next release and that the red, or *rouge* from the 2004 vintage would be syrah.

Chateau Sainte Roseline hopes to increase its production significantly in the next five years and all indications are this phenomenal growth will not impact the quality. You only need to visit the chateau, talk to the staff (Anne Helene, my tour guide, was incredibly enthusiastic about the chateau and the wines), and above all drink the wines to realize that this is a winery fated for world recognition. Now if we can only get the distributor, who I have been told is, House of Wine International, out of New York, to bring more of Chateau Sainte Roseline's wines into the country and expand their distribution channels! S'il vous plait… s'il vous plait!

* Please be sure to click on the *Around Town* tab to follow my meanderings and view some photos of the Provence region and to learn about some of the meals in the remarkable restaurants I have visited. You'll want to check this section often as within the next week or so, I will be off to Tuscany and the Italian vineyards for the month of June!

Did You Know…

"*Flying Wine Makers*" is a term identifying winemakers who jet around the world producing two vintages a year – one in the northern hemisphere and one south of the equator.