

## Dining & Wine

**LES RICEYS, FRANCE** — Last winter, workers renovating a winery in this village in [Champagne](#) poked through an old plaster ceiling. Down fell several bags of gold coins: U.S. dollars, dated 1851 to 1928 and valued at €700,000, or nearly \$900,000.

*Eric Pfanner/International Herald Tribune*

### Wine

#### A Summertime Wine Like No Other



The wine growers of Les Riceys are patient and discreet. Tucked away in their cellars is another treasure, also frequently kept hidden from the outside world. This one is liquid, and its color is not gold but pink.

Alongside sparkling Champagne, Les Riceys is the source of one of the more unusual wines you'll ever come across, if you can find it. The village — actually three villages strung out along a stream in the southern Champagne area known as the Aube — also makes a still wine, called Rosé des Riceys.

Some vigneron here have caches of Rosé des Riceys that date back nearly as far as those coins. On a recent visit I tasted wines from 1990, 1989 and 1982.

1990, '89 and '82? Three great years for Bordeaux, whose most age-worthy wines are now coming into their prime. But rosé? Surely no one would want to store it for two or even

three decades, right? Doesn't rosé go bad after a year or two, losing its fruit and tasting of nothing more than stale alcohol and dry cork?

Rosé des Riceys is different. Those old wines I tasted — from three producers, Guy de Forez, Morel Père & Fils and Jacques Defrance — had spent their many years in bottle productively.

The wines had long ago lost any sharp edges. They were lightly oxidized, giving them a bit of the character of tawny Port, yet they had retained much of their youthful fruit. The range of flavors was broad, from wild strawberries to almonds to liquorice. The aromas were those of pleasant decay, like the smell of plane trees in Paris after a spring rain.

"There are no other rosés like this," said Pascal Morel, the heir to the family estate, which, like other makers of Rosé des Riceys, is first and foremost a Champagne producer. "It is one of the only rosés that you can age."

Rosé des Riceys is not entirely alone. Across France, the biggest producer of rosé, there are other pink wines with plenty of character, even if I might hesitate to store them for more than a few years. I'm thinking of rosés from producers like Domaine de la Mordorée in the Tavel appellation of the Rhône Valley, Domaine Tempier in the Bandol region of Provence, Bruno Clair in the Burgundy village of Marsannay or La Ferme de la Sansonnière in the Loire Valley.

Unfortunately, wines like these are underappreciated. Many consumers ignore rosé for much of the year. Then, at the first sign of sunshine, pink plonk proliferates on store shelves and rosé season gets under way. The same people who agonize over the choice of a red or white wine uncritically fill their shopping carts with bottles or boxes of rosé.

Maybe it is best this way. With its zesty fruit, its dollop of sweetness and its lack of tannic structure, rosé is the quintessential easy-pleasy wine. It's a simple treat for a summer vacation, when the things we otherwise look for in wine — complexity, structure, elegance, longevity — can seem like tedious reminders of what we left behind. Three decades of aging potential? "No thanks," most people would probably say, "I'll be back at the office long before that."

It's no surprise that most rosé tastes only half as good when you get back home. Rosé des Riceys, on the other hand, might not be my first choice for the beach or a picnic, but it's a pink wine that's fine the rest of the year, too.

"It's an intimate wine, one that you drink with a small circle of enthusiasts," said Francis Wenner of Guy de Forez. "It's not a thirst-quencher."

If Rosé des Riceys is a wine to sip rather than to gulp, that is just as well, for there is precious little of it. In a normal year, around 60,000 bottles are made — a tiny drop in the bucket compared with the 300 million-plus bottles of sparkling Champagne that are made annually.

In some vintages, when the grapes fail to ripen sufficiently in these relatively northerly parts, no Rosé des Riceys is made at all. Even in good years, only a handful of growers give it a try.

They can earn more by selling their harvest to the big Champagne houses, or by making their own bubbly.

“Rosé des Riceys is a wine of passion,” Mr. Morel said. “If you are not passionate about it, you don’t make it.”

Only about 30 hectares, or 75 acres, out of more than 800 hectares of vineyards in Les Riceys are set aside for the production of still rosé. These vines tend to grow on steep, south-facing slopes in a series of canyons to the east and west of the village.

Only one grape variety, pinot noir is used. Pinot noir is also the sole ingredient in red Burgundy, whose greatest vineyards are only an hour’s drive south of Les Riceys, and there are certain resemblances. With a deep fuchsia, almost garnet color, Rosé des Riceys looks a bit like red Burgundy. It is several shades darker than the usual pale pink or salmon-colored rosé.

The deep color comes from a winemaking process called saignée, or bleeding, in which the crushed grapes are left to soak with the skins, which contain most of the pigment, for several days, before the juice is “bled” away for fermentation. (Paler rosés are pressed immediately and separated from the grape skins.)

The resemblance to serious red wine is strengthened by the heavy green or amber bottles, embossed with a special logo, that are used for Rosé des Riceys.

All of this can be disorienting. When I first tasted Rosé des Riceys I expected something more — more body, more tannin, more structure. The sensation of softness is enhanced by the fact that Rosé des Riceys contains relatively little alcohol — about 12 percent, a degree or two below the level in rosés from sunnier, more southerly vineyards.

“The idea is to flirt with making a red wine, without actually making a red wine,” Mr. Morel said.

Red Burgundy it is not, but Rosé des Riceys is unmistakably pinot noir. Its high-pitched perfume, its smoky, mossy complexity and its open freshness mark it clearly. This is not the tart, harshly acidic freshness of cheap supermarket rosé. It is something different, more delicate. The growers call it the “goût des Riceys” — the taste of Riceys.

Rosé des Riceys is also different from ordinary rosé in another important way — its price, which starts at around €12 a bottle and rises to €20 or more for certain examples. It may not be worth its weight in gold, but a little time in the cellar certainly pays off.

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