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Provence's Bubble Question

Ready for southern France's new wave of Champagne-style rosé?

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Summer rosé season is nearly over, Champagne time is coming, and more Provence winemakers are thinking about bubbles and pink.

To sum up the trend: Why not make traditional Provence rosé sparkle à la Champagne?

"Bubbles are festive, and our idea is to make them with the lightness and elegance of Provence," says Alain Combard, 70-year-old patriarch of *Domaine St.-André de Figuière* in the rolling vine-covered hills above the Mediterranean coast of La Londe Les Maures.

More than 60 winemakers and co-ops in the heart of Provence now make limited quantities of sparkling rosé in the *méthode traditionnelle*, as it's known outside Champagne. Under current French appellation laws, the wines are labeled humble Vin de France, with their Provence appellation nowhere in sight.

Combard, a longtime leader in Côtes de Provence rosé and producer of a pink sparkler called *Atmosphère* since 2008, has spent years negotiating the creation of a new designation recognizing traditionally made pink sparklers from Provence grapes. A formal request is to be filed in the coming months, and while approval would give a boost to Provence bubbles, it will likely take more years.

"France is an old lady," Combard laughs, "and things take time."

Provence has produced sparkling wine with varied methods for more than a century, but in the last 10 years the bulk of bubbles has flipped from white wine to pink. As president of Provence's Center for Research and Experimentation on Rosé Wine in 2007, Combard explored ways to perfect a Provence sparkler. The result is informally called the "*méthode Provençale*."

In the Champagne method, sugar and yeast are added to still wine in bottles to launch a secondary, bubble-creating fermentation. The Provence method—developed by a Champenois enologist here—uses grape juice (frozen at harvesttime) instead of sugar in order to keep already-ripe Provence alcohol levels in check and thereby preserve wine finesse. This method is now used by Combard and other producers who contract the bubbly part of winemaking to a Champagne-based company that makes most of the region's traditional bubbles in a Provence warehouse.

Combard, who technically retired in spring to leave the running of the estate to three of his children (but still shows up daily), knows about creating successful quality wines.

A Provence native, Combard as a young man ran a dairy farm the family owned in Chablis. His life changed in 1970 when he partnered with Chablis winemaker Michel Laroche and helped build *Domaine Laroche* into a major producer over



Robert Camuto

*Provence vigneron*s Alain Combard and son, Francois

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21 years. In 1991, when the two parted ways, Combard searched the south for his own estate and found St.-André de Figuière, which he has built into a leading producer known for meticulous organic vineyard management and precise winemaking.

"Twenty years ago, rosé wasn't considered wine," Combard says. "My friends from Chablis thought I was crazy."

The domaine today produces more than 83,000 cases of still wine, sourced from estate and contract vineyards, topped by the flagship "Confidentielle" line. The 2013 Côtes de Provence Rosé La Londe Confidentielle—90 points—retails for \$41.

The domaine's vintage sparkler, Atmosphère (not rated, about \$26, nearly 1,700 cases), is an extra-brut made from Cinsault, Grenache and a bit of white Rolle that spends at least a year in bottle before the lees are disgorged and the wine is capped.

Tasting the 2011 and 2012 vintages with Combard, it became clear that a Provence sparkler is something more than rosé with fizz. Technically speaking, the secondary, in-bottle fermentation with juice not only adds bubbles but changes the aromatics of the wine toward darker fruit (think more strawberry and less apricot).

Though pleased with the result, Combard is not entirely satisfied. "We are still looking for a way to conserve those primary aromas of Provence," he says. "Rosé is a fragile wine."

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