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How my grandfather introduced Britain to the joy of rosé wine

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William Sitwell's favourite rosé wine is grown in Provence CREDIT: ISTOCK



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A glass of rosé can recall summer, holidays and freedom, writes William Sitwell

Building some nesting boxes for the hens last week, I came across evidence of a claim once made by my grandfather: that he had introduced rosé to the British in the early Fifties.

Rooting around for some wood, I found a large heavy box which had stencilled on to the lid the word "Sitwell" and our address. And then on one side: "Mateus Rosé". Inside were old newspapers from the early Sixties, in a foreign language.

I kept the stencilled sides and lid for posterity and used the rest for the intended egg-inducing shelter. Then later, the job done, I retreated to the house gasping for a cool drink on this warm spring evening.

Joyously I had planned ahead, and in the fridge was my favourite rosé of the modern age: a bottle of Mirabeau Pure. Sharing a glass with my wife, the spring evening suddenly became a balmy night of Mediterranean bliss. Such is the power of the scent of a good rosé, one that is not overcoloured but has the faintest hint of pink. And the round, subtle sweetness that takes a standard grape to a higher echelon; a dinghy becoming a superyacht, a pond a lake.

Quite why this happens I'm not sure, since rosé is basically dyed white wine. There are different ways of making it, but Mirabeau is produced after grenache and syrah grapes are harvested at high altitude in Provence at night. It means the skins are cool, so they are left longer in the juice to macerate. This enables the juice to take on more flavour but less colour.



William is planning a trip to France after lockdown CREDIT: GETTY

The result is a subtle rosé: dry, a little zingy and enhanced by a colour that is ballet slipper pink. But what makes it tastier is the thought that it is the result of almost reckless insanity. Briton Stephen Cronk dragged his wife and three kids from Teddington to Provence so that he could fulfil a desire to make wine, although he had zero knowledge and even less French.

After lockdown I hope to visit Stephen, to step into his dream that became reality, at Domaine Mirabeau (mirabeauwine.com): 9,600 acres of grapevines that nestle between hills covered with umbrella pines, cork oak trees and chestnut groves swaying gently in the easterly wind, bringing relief from the hot climate. In fact guests can now – or, at least, soon – stay in an old farmhouse in the middle of the vineyard and swim laps of the pool in between sips of rosé.

That the Cronks now sell Mirabeau to 50 countries and it's the bestselling Provençal rosé in the UK definitely helps me relish each sip. I toast Stephen, and the new henhouse, and also my grandfather. And, inspired by my discovery in the shed, I did some digging around.

Rosé wasn't a thing in the post-war years. But then the writer Sacheverell Sitwell, or Sachie as we knew him, came across that iconic bottle, inspired by Second World War soldiers' flasks. He was researching a book, *Portugal and Madeira*, in which he revelled in the country's baroque and rococo architecture, the golden interiors of its churches and, of course, its pink wine. On his return in 1951 he wrote in his newspaper column: "Mateus is delicious beyond words, the most delicious vin rosé that I have ever tasted. It is a pity that one cannot buy it in England."

In 1978, Frank Prial reflected on this in *The New York Times*: "Mateus went on to become one of the most popular wines in England," he wrote. "One might have assumed the Sitwells were into better stuff – clarets, hocks, vintage ports. But if the great wine revolution in Britain must be traced to the execrable taste of Sacheverell Sitwell, so be it."

So those old newspapers were Portuguese. Perhaps Sacheverell was forever rewarded by Mateus for his stunning marketing job with regular deliveries in those solid boxes. Indeed, on their website today they still champion his early praise.

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So 60 years after one Englishman said we should drink it, another went and made a rather better one. Now I have no excuse not to sip it frequently. My grandfather drank it in winter, to remind him of summer. I'm drinking it now to remind me of the good times: of summer, holidays and freedom. It is even assuaging the guilt I feel at turning what should be a museum piece into a nesting box.

William Sitwell is The Telegraph's weekly restaurant reviewer. Read more of his articles at telegraph.co.uk/authors/william-sitwell



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