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For You, a Bouquet of Rosés

By Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg
Wednesday, February 13, 2008; Page F05

No need to worry if you've put off planning a special evening with a special someone tomorrow night -- or if you have no such evening planned. A flute of pink sparkling wine is a celebration in a glass no matter whom you share it with, or when.

Rosés and sparklers are two of the most food-friendly wine styles around: The former can pinch-hit as either whites or reds, while the latter's crisp acidity and bubbles cleanse the palate. Marry the two, and the match creates the world's single food-friendliest wine.

Within the realm of rosé sparkling wines, you'll find variations that run the gamut: from delicate to robust in color, body and flavor, and from dry to off-dry in sweetness. Here you can find a match for virtually any food. Pink sparklers can be as great with "surf," including clams, mussels, oysters, squid, crab, lobster, salmon and tuna, as they are with "turf," such as rare filet mignon, lamb or duck. They also can stand up to creamy mushroom dishes and other rich foods, fried or salty starters and even spicy foods, including chili-laden dishes from Mexican, Hunan, Indian, Sichuan and Thai cuisines.

Over the past few weeks, we sipped our way through dozens of bottles of pink sparkling wines made in the traditional method to bring you the best of the bunch. Because readers often seek a wine in a particular price range, we've listed them in increasing order of price -- and into stratospheres that make us blush. (Check out the "Tips" box below for a steal at \$11.)

From among our three California sparkling rosé recommendations, Karen netted her pick of the week: The N.V. **Roederer Estate Anderson Valley Brut Rosé Sparkling Wine** (\$27) is the effort of an offshoot of Champagne's Louis Roederer, maker of famed Cristal Champagne. The nose is strawberry cheesecake: ripe, round strawberries with hints of cream cheese, vanilla and



(Photos By Julia Ewan -- The Washington Post)

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STAFF PICKS

KAREN'S PICK

Wine: N.V. Roederer Estate Anderson Valley Brut Rose Sparkling Wine

Rationale: This rose sparkler from the California cousin of Roederer, maker of Cristal Champagne, is a steal given its impressive quality and versatility with food.

Country: USA

Region: California's Anderson Valley

Winemaker: Arnaud Weyrich

Price: \$27

Grapes: 60 percent pinot noir, 40 percent chardonnay

Color: pale salmony orange-pink

Aromas: strawberry cheesecake: berries, cream cheese, vanilla

Flavors: light, tart strawberries and cherries with vanilla notes and a

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graham cracker crust. With its lush body, constant stream of tiny bubbles and long, creamy finish, this is a sparkler with impressive finesse. We found it all the more impressive that it paired so well with food, especially sauteed salmon, which perfectly echoed its color.

Although our other two California choices hail from Sonoma's Russian River Valley, they could hardly be more different. The **N.V. J Brut Rosé** (\$35) is a relative whisper of a pink sparkler, very delicate in color, body and flavor -- so much so that we worried it would be overwhelmed by food. But we were pleasantly surprised to find that it, too, was an ideal complement to delicate sauteed salmon. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the **2003 Iron Horse Brut Rosé** (\$50), from the Green Valley, is deep ruby-pink in color and equally big in flavor, body and even aroma. (Imagine the scent of cherry Jolly Rancher candies nestled in a haystack.) Although this rosé overpowered the same salmon, it stood up beautifully to sliced rare filet mignon.

Those first three choices represented a somewhat narrow flavor band. The **N.V. Champagne Taittinger Prestige Rosé Brut** (\$60) is lighter-bodied, with bright, refreshing raspberry and strawberry flavors and streams of fine bubbles. Surprisingly, it paired beautifully with the salmon and the filet.

The **2002 Louis Roederer Vintage Rosé Champagne Brut** (\$75) is drier and more delicate than Karen's pick, its California cousin. It is an elegant sparkler with an abundance of fine bubbles and a rich, creamy finish that underscored the salmon's silkiness.

Andrew's pick, the **N.V. Laurent -Perrier Cuvée Rosé Brut Champagne** (\$80), is a splurge champagne for any occasion that calls for one. He loved its tart red-fruit notes -- cherries, raspberries and strawberries -- on the nose and palate. This was an extraordinary match with the salmon, both with and without a red-pepper sauce. Its distinctive round-bottomed bottle is modeled after those used in the late 17th century, and its salmon hue is the result of the saignée method, wherein the juice is left in contact with red grape skins, which bleed a pink tinge. (More commonly, a bit of red wine is simply added to the finished blend.)

If you're looking for something even more over the top in flavor and extravagance, look no further. These two are as different from their champagne brethren as cabernet is from pinot: The **2002 Nicolas Feuillatte Palmes d'Or Rosé Champagne** (\$179), which comes in a red velvet gift pouch, is like a big, brooding red with a chocolaty espresso finish. It easily stood up to filet mignon with wild mushrooms. The **N.V. Champagne Krug Brut Rosé** (\$189 for 375 ml), which comes in a pearly-pink gift box, was one of a kind: We had never tasted anything like it before. Rather than pair it with food, we sipped it on its own to marvel at its silky texture and its nuanced flavors that -- though some might find this disrespectful -- suggested the world's best strawberry Pop-Tart.

With any one of these sparkling selections, you can surprise your date with an all-pink menu: paper-thin slices of smoked salmon, prosciutto or beef carpaccio, or even takeout salmon and tuna sushi. If your date isn't really a date, you can raise a delicious toast to anything you like, such as friendship.

TipsTHINKING PINK

Look outside the Champagne region for the best values in pink sparkling wines. Spain makes its famed cava sparklers using the same traditional method of secondary bottle fermentation that is used to make champagne. (In fact, cava -- which is Catalan for "cellar" -- was called "champan" until use of the term was nixed by the French.) Cava's flavors tend to be a bit more on the earthy, savory side, and the wines are almost invariably great buys.

Our bargain recommendation this week is the **N.V. Segura Viudas Brut Rosé Cava** (\$11) from Spain. This bright-reddish-pink bubbly, aged in the bottle for one to two years, has coffeelike aromas. Its Old World earthiness and toastiness are well balanced by robust strawberry and raspberry flavors.

To enhance the flavor of rosé bubbly even further, serve it very cold (about 45 degrees) and keep it on ice after opening. *Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page, award-winning authors of "What to Drink with What You Eat," can be reached through their Web site, <http://www.becomingachef.com>, or at food@washpost.com.*

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