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Sommelier INDIA

THE WINE MAGAZINE

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Dare to Dream in Pink

The Mirabeau story in Provence sounds like a fairy tale, but behind the scenes lies a very different tale – one of struggle and risk-taking says **Ruma Singh**

Over 20 years ago, Stephen Cronk was based in his London home with a thriving career in the telecom sector. He had three young children with his German-born wife, Jeany, and life was just dandy. Then it all changed.

The 2008 economic crisis hit the UK and it got Stephen thinking about a change. Which involved leaving the safety of his corporate life to take a life-changing risk for himself and his family and a 180-degree career change – liquidating all his assets and a move to a new country, France – all to make wine.

Fast forward 15 years, and today Maison Mirabeau is feted as a classic Provence rosé and a global success. But the story begins many years before this shift. Stephen fell in love with wine during a gap-year in Australia, something he knew little about.

“I didn’t come from a family particularly interested in wine so I had no connection to it and everything to learn. During my travels, I not only discovered that I enjoyed wine, I became passionate about its sense of place and its people.”

Stephen decided to return to the UK to look for work in the wine industry and started a distribution business, selling wine to restaurants and clubs in London for a time, before returning to the fast-growing tech sector. “I wanted to start a family and build my financial capital,” he confesses.

When Stephen was offered a promotion, he decided to ask for redundancy instead. His wife Jeany played a role in this decision. Jeany had spent her childhood summers in the south of France where her family had a second home and where she developed a love of the southern lifestyle and everything pale pink, drinking

rosé from the Cote d’Azur.

Jeany became convinced rosé had a future beyond being just a summer holiday wine. Both husband and wife were curious to see what life would be like in the rural hillside of Provence, beyond St Tropez. The timing proved right. Provence was in the midst of a fast-developing rosé boom, a wine region that offered the couple a perfect mix of the historic and the modern. “We felt that it would suit us well as newcomers, and give us the opportunity to make an accessible luxury range that we felt the UK market was missing.” Of course, it was not rosés all the way. The early days were difficult and full of struggle, Stephen recounts.

“Our children did not speak French at all, and they had to adapt without their friends to a new school system. The admin was almost insurmountable and the standard answer I got was, “Non, monsieur,” but the silver lining came through “awesome and unexpected breaks.” The children made friends quickly, Jeany joined the school parents committee and they met people who understood their vision and introduced them to potential growers and bottling partners. Angela Muir MW joined the team to oversee quality and blending operations, which helped them maintain high standards, essential for the premium market they were targeting.

How did Mirabeau get its name? After a lot of research, admits Stephen. The name broadly translates to “beautiful view” and is well known in Provence, as it’s also the name of a local aristocrat, the Comte de Mirabeau, who was a prominent member of the National Assembly for Aix-en-Provence. “We loved the meaning. Provence has gorgeous views, plus the wines are so visually appealing in their luminous



Stephen and Jeany Cronk who left London to follow their dream of producing rosé wine in France

pink colour,” says Jeany. “To our surprise we found it wasn’t trademarked so we got the all clear in a matter of months.”

Maison Mirabeau launched its first cuvée, Mirabeau Classic in the UK in 2011 with the 2010 vintage which was a major milestone. The launch was a success gaining a loyal following in the UK, and expanding eventually to other countries. “We called it just ‘Mirabeau’ And since 90% of Provence’s production is dedicated to rosé winemaking, we decided to specialise in specific styles of rosés and stay away from other styles.”

Life proved to be hectic from the get-go, confessed Stephen. “There weren’t any restful periods in the early years, but we understood

Provence was in the midst of a fast-developing rosé boom, a wine region that offered the couple a perfect mix of the historic and the modern

that early days are always make or break.”

They grabbed every opportunity that presented itself with both hands in terms of PR and innovation. Some very unusual tactics, Stephen explains, included “turning up in London in my battered 2CV to sell wine at festivals, inviting journalists to the office in our spare room and feeding them with our three young kids at the terrace dinner table.”

Success came slowly but steadily, and within three years they were looking at producing their next cuvée, Pure. Then came another bold step – the decision to rapidly expand their portfolio even as their business was still growing. “We had a lot of energy,” Stephen says, “and we were excited by the trends we could see crystallising, from newer formats to

lower alcohol wines, including spirits.”

Mirabeau pioneered the launch of its pink gin at a time when the trend was just taking off. It was the fastest growing gin in the UK when it launched, inspired by the range of flora in Provence that offered the opportunity to make something distinctive.

“We were pioneers in many of today’s well-accepted innovations, sometimes so early that it didn’t really work until the rest of the market caught up,” he admits. Their canned rosé is now very successful but it didn’t really pick up until three years after the launch. “We realised we needed to be more precise and there was no point innovating for the sake of it. So we are really careful with what we do now, and what we leave for another day.”

Being at the right place at the right time played an important role, too, Stephen says. “We very clearly hit the zeitgeist with the Provence style at the right time, with a lighter, more visual, more fun and accessible product than traditional French wine.”

The Provençal pale rosé offers quality, yet is easy to understand and suits creative branding. Provence contains some of the coolest wine places in the south of France within its borders, so Jeany and Stephen had little doubt that the “specialness” and appeal of these products was here to stay. “The fact that large luxury beverage companies and winemakers have adopted the style indicates that it is no passing fad.”

A question consumers often ask is why Provence rosés are so expensive.

“Provence rosés tend to be pale, fresh and highly aromatic,” Stephen says, “a quality that has often been copied but rarely matched by others. It’s an expensive and time-consuming process to maintain this standard. We are also in a region with very high land and human capital costs, so it’s not possible to make wine ‘cheaply’ here.”

Vineyards in Provence are not very large



The Mirabeau portfolio comprises a variety of rosé wine styles and gin

compared to other successful regions. Yet, on the scale of finer wines, Provence rosé is very accessible and can be an everyday pleasure with real quality.

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“The darker and more structured styles are fairly rare here,” Stephen points out. “Although some houses ferment and age their wine in oak, often with a high percentage of Vermentino, the white variety we are allowed to co-ferment in our rosés. Our own estate wine, Mirabeau La Reserve, is fermented and aged in oak, using 500-litre barrels that have been lightly toasted and some very special 225-litre barrels, toasted using lava and jade stones.”

Stephen is very proud of this more complex and expressive wine, which is served with stronger flavours such as roasted meats and cheese, and not overly chilled. “These are styles for wine lovers who want to explore the possibilities for rosé, and not necessarily for everyone,” he says.

Consumers often think that rosés make



Hands-on in all aspects of the business, Stephen and Jeany work with the team during the blending process



Stephen and Jeany taste barrel samples of their wine as it ages in the cellar

for pleasant drinking, but cannot be taken seriously as a wine style, unlike whites, reds and sparkling wines. Stephen's take was that it's usually the wine trade that did not take rosé seriously. "Of course, within all colours there exist wines that are made industrial-style or are uninteresting to drink, and rosé is no exception." So while rosés are rarely aged, they are technically possible to age as rosé champagnes show.

Stephen says, "We know a fair few very accomplished wine consumers who love a Provence rosé when the moment is right and Provence pretty much has a place now on every wine menu. It's only a matter of time before the rosé style evolves, but its sweet spot will probably always be as a young and joyful wine."

Having developed an exciting wine and lifestyle business, the Cronks are also very interested in building a brand that supports a better world. A devastating wildfire that swept

through 7,000 hectares of the Var region, including part of their own vineyards in 2021, has underlined the urgency to move forward.

"To that end we have achieved B Corp status and farm regeneratively at our own estate, as well as slowly converting our grape growers to regenerative farming," Stephen says. "We know it will help with the challenges of climate change and will contribute towards a better equilibrium. We believe that there is real joy in drinking something that you know is made in a way that is truly in tune with nature." ♦

GETTING THERE

The estate, Domaine Mirabeau is near the historic village of La Garde-Freinet, Golfe de Saint Tropez, Provence, about 1¼–1½ hours by road from Nice Côte d'Azur Airport and 1¼ hours from Marseille-Provence Airport. Its location makes a convenient base for exploring the French Riviera, while staying away from its crowds and coastline bustle.
Access: Car recommended for visiting the estate and exploring the surrounding wine region

Grover
art^{NU}
COLLECTION

ART COLLECTION
NU
LOOK
NU EXPRESSION

Art Collection Nu is Grover's new expression of Indian wine, crafted for nights that move, tables that linger, and conversations that unfold. Vivid, fruit-forward, beautifully balanced, each bottle is made to feel effortless in the glass and memorable in the moment.



The new labels capture that same energy, modern, expressive, alive with colour, but the real story is what it brings to your evening: A sense of celebration, discovery, and a little more spark in every pour.

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VIOGNER CHENIN BLANC SAUVIGNON BLANC RIESLING LATE HARVEST MERLOT CABERNET SHIRAZ SHIRAZ ROSÉ

