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In Tavel, Paying Homage to the Rosé of Kings



Owen Franken for The New York Times

A rosé with a bowl of tellines, a small clam, at a Stes.-Marie-de-la-Mer restaurant. Those who make Tavel rosé praise the way it goes with food.

By ELLEN KAYE
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TAVEL, a town of 1,600 perched at the edge of the Languedoc, on the brink of [Provence](#), is the veritable cradle of French rosé. A staple of the ancient papal court in nearby [Avignon](#) and a favorite of Louis XIV and Philippe le Bel (earning it the dual sobriquets Rosé of Kings and King of Rosés), Tavel was the first rosé to be designated AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée). The appellation has stayed true to its roots; to be called a Tavel, it must be a rosé.

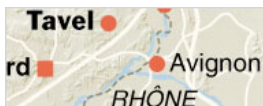
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For those of us who revere the name Tavel — like my husband, Andy Besch, who marks the beginning of each spring with the announcement of pitchers and catchers reporting to training camp and the appearance of those first few cases of rosé at his [New York City](#) wine shop — a visit to this cherished spot is almost like a pilgrimage to Mecca.

What makes the rosé from Tavel so special? “It’s because rosé is what we do,” said Pascal Lafond as he opened a bottle of his Domaine Lafond Roc-Épine at lunch on the terrace of the [Auberge de Tavel](#) this past August. “Others save their best vines for red, if that’s what they have their reputation for, and the rosé comes after. For us, the rosé comes first.”

“It’s a classic,” said Séverine Lemoine, a third-generation winemaker sitting across the table. “It’s more complex. It’s a wine for consuming all year.”

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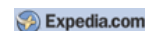
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This debate over the unique qualities of the Tavel rosé was in many ways the continuation of a discussion that had taken place back in New York last January, one that eventually led to the journey to Tavel itself.

Eric Pfifferling of L'Anglore [winery](#), seated to my left at a winemakers' event in TriBeCa, was talking about his dream to share his passion for New York with his two teenage sons back in Tavel. On my right, Andy was rhapsodizing about his passion for rosé. In the middle, the designated translator (me) brokered a house-swapping deal, secretly praying that there would be more to this place than just grapes.

Eight months later, we arrived in Tavel as the Pfifferling family was preparing to depart for our New York brownstone, which they would do, Eric insisted, right after taking us jet-lagged city mice on a tour of the vines.

One thing is plain to see, even for the layman; the terroir of Tavel is unique. The low rainfall, the summer heat, and the protective winds of the mistral make for rich and hearty grapes. Then there are the rocks. A single journey through Tavel's roughly 10-mile Route du Vignoble is like a geological field study. On the western loop, the vines force their way through slate covered with chunks of chalky limestone, while on the east they bake in "galets roulés" — smooth, round stones formed by the centuries of floodwaters that poured through the Rhône Valley after the last ice age. The southernmost vines stretch lazily in the sun over a fine, sandy soil.

Since only around 200,000 bottles of Tavel make their way to the [United States](#) each year (out of an annual production of five million), a voyage to the source is the most surefire way to slake an ardent thirst. Thirty of Tavel's wineries are open to visitors. For one-stop sampling, the Caveau St.-Vincent, smack in the center of town, offers 30 Tavel rosés for tasting and buying. And for those sticking around for a while, the best deal in town is at Les Vignerons de Tavel, the local cooperative, where a 19-liter box (the equivalent of about 13 1/2 bottles!) can be had for 15.50 euros (\$23.25 at \$1.50 to the euro).

I was delighted to find that sticking around Tavel for a while can be a surprisingly rich experience, even for those for whom rosé is just another shade of pink. A walk along the Route du Vignoble or one of the marked [hiking](#) trails around the town is a great way to prime the senses for a day of tasting. A dip in the town pool, where for 2.30 euros anyone is welcome, is a perfect refresher. And an early-evening game of tennis on a town court will whet the appetite for dinner in the tree-lined [garden](#) of La Genetière, as the southern sky fades from blue to rosé to black.

Situated between the Cévennes Mountains, the marshes of the Camargue and the lush greenery of Provence, Tavel provides a convenient home base for a variety of excursions. Twenty-five minutes to the west sits the charming town of Uzès, with its 11th-century buildings and sophisticated shops, and, on market day, stall after stall of fresh local produce, creamy Pélardon goat cheese, olives cured in dozens of different seasonings, fougasse (a doughy disk that comes sweet or savory), sausages, spices and the requisite Provençal fabrics and piles of lavender by-products.

Practically around the corner from Tavel is the Pont du Gard, where after viewing the well-preserved remains of the spectacular Roman aqueduct, one can hike, picnic, swim and [canoe](#) along the river. St.-Rémy is 45 minutes away, and an hour and a half south will put you into the salty waters of the Mediterranean — ideally after a bowl of juicy mussels or tiny tellines in one of the bustling seaside resort towns of Stes.-Marie-de-la-Mer or Le Grau du Roi.


In summer, point the car in any direction and you'll find a town in celebration — medieval festivals, garlic festivals, ceramic festivals and the ubiquitous carnivals with their bejeweled carousels and sticky barbe à papa (cotton candy). Signs plastered on lampposts everywhere announce "fêtes votives," patron saint commemorations in "villages de bouvine"— literally "towns of cattle," in this case, bulls.

In fact, in this area most of the summertime spectacles seem to have something to do with bulls. When you hear the overture to "Carmen," it's time to get out of the way, fast. Bull-herding exhibitions, right through the center of a town, are a common sight.

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The best time to go? For me, taking advantage of the relative quiet of August for both the winemaker and the wine retailer was the only choice, and in my opinion a good one. My lunchtime companions at the Auberge didn't quite agree. Sandra Guy, communications attaché for the Syndicat Viticole de l'Appellation Tavel, insisted that spring was the time to visit. "No, maybe autumn," she corrected herself. "September, when the harvest begins and the colors start to change."

"But the wines?" said Christophe Chaudeyrac, president of the Syndicat. "I enjoy them in spring, and even more in winter, for Christmas and fêtes de famille. It's too hot in the summer."

"Ah, the smell of Provence," he sighed as a bowl of homemade pistou was placed before him. "Of course, you know Tavel rosés are made for food," he said, swirling a glass of Ms. Lemoine's Domaine la Rocalière 2006 in his glass and holding it up to the noonday sun.

ON THE BRINK OF PROVENCE

Tavel is a 10-minute drive from the [Avignon](#) TGV train station, and 15 minutes from the Avignon airport.

The **Auberge de Tavel** (Voie Romaine; 33-4-66-50-03-41; www.auberge-de-tavel.com) is a charming hotel built in a former boys school, with 10 rooms and one suite, and a swimming pool. Double rooms begin at 90 euros per night (\$135 at \$1.50 to the euro). Its restaurant offers elegant meals prepared by the owner, with prix fixe menus beginning at 27 euros, and a six-course tasting menu at 72 euros.

Restaurant la Genestière (Chemin de Cravailleux; 33-4-66-50-94-56; www.genestiere.com), with its shaded [garden](#) and formal dining room, offers a four-course seasonal menu for 29 euros.

Set back from the main street on the Place du Seigneur is the tasting room and wine shop **Caveau St.-Vincent** (Place du Seigneur; 33-4-66-50-24-10). The Tavel wine cooperative, **Les Vignerons de Tavel** (Route de la Commanderie; 33-4-66-50-03-57) is open seven days a week. Most of Tavel's [wineries](#) welcome visitors, but it is best to call ahead to check the opening hours. All are easily visible from the road, or clearly marked by signs. A fairly comprehensive list can be found at www.tavel.tm.fr.

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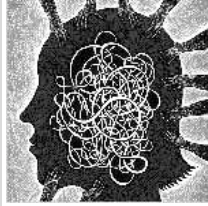


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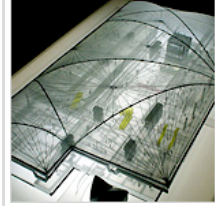
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