

Sweet, strong recommendations

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'Tis the season to be merry, and to disregard society's disapproval of the strong and sweet. Sweet wines are some of the world's most delicious, and most difficult to make well. Most independent wine merchants have a reasonable selection of these treats from south west France, Loire, Alsace, Germany, Austria (RIP Alois Kracher, who put Burgenland botrytised wines on the map and died earlier this month at the age of 48), Spain (especially Navarra), Italy (stunning dried grape wines), Greece, Hungary, Canada (ice wine aplenty), Australia, South Africa and now South America as well as all over the United States.

Because the Christmas holidays are almost upon us I have concentrated on what is available from the larger retailers, especially the best value ports. Wines are listed in increasing price per cl within each category.

Dry, tangy sherries

Hidalgo Napoleon Amontillado Seco sherry

£7.99 Majestic

17.5% Nutty nose. Very light and transparent. Seriously underpriced. Try Hidalgo's Manzanilla too.

Taste the Difference 12 year old Dry Amontillado

£6.99 for 50cl Sainsbury

17.5% Light, pale, dry and super-tangy – the rapid rancio effect of prolonged ageing in wood in a hot climate. So tart it's almost like a Sercial Madeira. This would really restore a jaded palate.

Port

Tesco Finest Pedro Ximénez NV Andalusia

£4.99 for 50cl Tesco

15% Dark, immensely rich but not rancio – just pure raisined fruit dried in the Andalusian sun and only part fermented. Sugar levels are about 400 g/l – the sort of wine that goes admirably with Christmas pudding, but it is almost a syrup.

Late Bottled Vintage Port 2001

£10.99 M&S

20% Nutty, seriously interesting wine that is much better value than Marks & Spencer's standard Finest Reserve port at £8.99. A molten zap of a wine from Taylor Fladgate Partnership.

Quinta do Noval Late Bottled Vintage Port 2001

£10.99 Oddbins, £11.99 Tesco

20% There's a slightly raisined quality on the nose but a very concentrated and surprisingly dry finish. You don't have to wait until the end of a meal for this – you could actually drink it with, say, venison or hare in a really rich sauce.

Fonseca Unfiltered Late Bottled Vintage 2000

£11.99 Majestic

20% Extremely sweet and round and luscious with the kick of tannins reserved to the very end of the palate. Pretty massive.

Berrys' LBV port, Quinta do Noval

£12.95 Berry Bros

20% Deep crimson – a wine with real character. Still very good value, even though nearly £1 more than remarkably similar wines available from Tesco et al (see above).

Graham's Crusted Port 2001

£14.99 Sainsbury

20% This isn't port from a single vintage but a blend of pretty smart wines made in three different years, older than 2001, from the likes of Graham's flagship wine farm Quinta dos Malvedos. They were blended and bottled, unfiltered, in 2001. And what you're left with now is a rich port throbbing with character but with a bit of sediment so, like vintage port, which is also matured in bottle, it will benefit from decanting, pouring the wine off the sediment before serving.

Taste the Difference Vintage Port 2000

£19.99 Sainsbury

20% This blend comes from the ancient mixed variety vines of Quinta do Crasto and is really interesting and exciting. Superior, tightly knit nose with a dry finish after a rich beginning. Should drink well, indeed improve, over another 10 years. Good value.

Dow's Quinta do Bomfim 1996

£21.99 Tesco

20% In its special wooden box, this centenary bottling would make a handsome present. No hurry to drink it, much garlanded, it's still quite firm and tight but amazingly persistent. There is more freshness than in many of its counterparts. Decant well in advance if serving now.

Vintage Port 1991

£22.99 Marks & Spencer

20% Excellent value from Croft, now part of the same group as Fonseca and Taylor though made by a quite different regime in the year of the first Gulf War. Glossy, easy and fully mature.

Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas 1998

£24 Majestic, £24.99 Oddbins, also Fareham Wine

20% Liquorice, spicy manly dry finish, really exciting. This single quinta port, just one notch below Taylor's vintage port, is always a great buy.

20 Year Old Tawny port

£29.99 Marks & Spencer

20% Much, much richer and more satisfying than M&S's 10 year old at £12.99. Satisfyingly reminiscent of walnuts with lots of rancio character but mellifluously sweet too. From Taylor Fladgate.

Dow 1985 port

£44.65 Ancient & Modern Wines, £62 Berry Bros

20% A bottle of fully mature vintage port would be a treat for everyone, though make sure you finish it within a day or two. This one has the delicate pale rosy glow of a mature port and it really delicate yet lively without being spiritry. A powerful, unctuous essence.

Taylor's 1985 port

£48 Finewine- online.co.uk, £73 Berry Bros

20% Quite a different style: much deeper colour. Dense and subtle with some of the trademark violets about it. Lovely, opulent and still with lots of concentration there.

Fonseca 1985 port

£55 Nickolls & Perks, £78 Berry Bros

20% Very deep crimson. Luscious, well knit nose. Round and gorgeously sweet but with lift. There is still some tannin here even after 22 years but you could certainly drink it with pleasure now, and for the next 15 or 20 years. Slinky – almost a port in a cocktail address.

Sweet wines

Ceretto 2006 Moscato d'Asti

£12.99, £6.99 a half Bibendum Wine

5.5% Nice bottle of Michael Broadbent's favourite style of pudding wine. Very sweet and explosively frothy. No bitterness, which some of these Moscatos have.

Tanners Sauternes NV

£9.40 for 50cl Tanners

13% 'The bits and pieces' from 'a very famous property' 'whose identity is a closely guarded secret'. Less sweet and lighter than any first wine from a classed growth Sauternes but certainly distinguished, persistent and a very good buy.

Sauternes 2005

£7.99 for 37.5cl Marks & Spencer

13.5% Very luscious and good value. Easy, big and bold from an unspecified chateau - to be drunk early.

Taste the Difference Sauternes 2005

£8.49 for 37.5cl Sainsbury

13% Thoroughly respectable classic sweet white bordeaux from recently revamped classed growth Ch Guiraud. A little light on the palate but great on the nose.

Lafage 2003 Rivesaltes Tuilé

£8.50 for 37.5cl Bibendum, Wines at 39 of Edinburgh

Very full and rich. Almost like tawny port with a notably dry finish after all the sweetness. A Roussillon vin doux naturel.

Villiera Noble Late Harvest Chenin Blanc 2005 Stellenbosch

£9.99 for 37.5cl Tesco

12.36% (NB vintage change) The 2004 was excellent value: very honeyed and sweet but with really exciting acidity too; oak aged but only to add texture. I haven't tasted the 2005 but suspect it is worth trying.

Castelnau de Suduiraut 2001 Sauternes

£19.99 for 75cl Majestic

13% This delicious bottle of amazingly rich pear nectar from a stunning Sauternes vintage and one of the top properties of the appellation seems underpriced to me. It should continue to improve.

Villa di Monte 1990 Vin Santo del Chianti Rufina

£15 for 37.5cl top M&S stores

17% This dried Tuscan grape treasure may be difficult to track down but it's worth it. The wine is not desperately sweet and may be best with cheese, nuts and dried fruit rather than a dessert but with its almondy nose and long aged rancio finish, it is just so interesting. Wines like this seem to keep for ever in an opened bottle. A real *vino da meditazione*.