

## It doesn't have to be dry

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For many a wine drinker in the northern hemisphere, even (perhaps particularly) in the current economic climate, the chilly depths of winter is the time when pulling out all the stops seems not self-indulgent, but a necessary ritual. Social life can be a whirl of entertaining, and the season itself seems enough justification to pop and pull corks out of carefully hoarded bottles.

It is also a time, arguably more than any other time of year, for treating yourself, your friends and family to the sorts of wine that tend to be overlooked for 11 months of the year: the strong, the sweet and the sticky. And if ever there is a time of year to disregard the extra calories in a bottle of something sweet, this is it.

I never cease to be amazed, however, at how today's army of new wine lovers around the globe by and large blithely ignores sweet wines. Even in the United States, where the nation treats itself to more sweet things than any other I can think of, sweet wines hardly get a look in. Visitors from Europe may be struck by how widely a range of extremely sugary desserts is substituted for a cheese course, but they will look in vain on most restaurant wine lists for sweet wines to drink with their pecan chocolate fudge or tiramisu as thoughtfully chosen as the range of dry wines available. Only a tiny proportion of California's vast wine output is sweet, for example.

France has a history of serving sweet wine but manages to confound foreign visitors just as much as America does - by traditionally serving it as an aperitif, preferring to serve bone dry champagne with the dessert. Very odd. And in any case, the French habit of serving Sauternes or a Pineau des Charentes before a meal is waning rapidly in favour of more chic aperitifs such as Scotch or even, among very sophisticated French people, a glass of dry white wine or champagne.

In Bordeaux, the makers of sweet wines, even great, sweet botrytised wines such as top quality Sauternes, admit that they are engaged in a labour of love. The Médoc is awash with dry red wine that is made in vast quantities every year. Meanwhile in Sauternes, they are utterly dependent on nuances of the weather that may, or may not, encourage noble rot - and every vine has to be lovingly revisited many times each harvest. The production costs are much, much higher than in the red wine districts - and yet the wine prices just bump along.

Even in the UK where I am based, you can lead a very busy and sophisticated social life without ever coming across a sweet wine. Vintage port used to be *de rigueur* on English sideboards but is now drunk regularly by only a tiny slice of the population, typically those who yearn for the life of the country gentleman of yesteryear. In the early 1990s I was invited to Oporto's famous Factory House to give the speech after the port shipper members' annual dinner. Big mistake. With singular lack of tact I chose to talk about how the port shippers might address the shrinking nature of their market. Shrinking? That was news to them. They and their buddies drank quite enough port to keep what they have always called the Port Wine Trade going for many a long year. I was, understandably, treated like a pariah over coffee. But now, unfortunately, they can probably see what I was getting at. Port is a unique and wonderful drink, even better quality today than it ever has been, and yet it struggles to achieve the prices it deserves in the fine wine market. Oxbridge colleges are stacked to the gunwales with increasingly dusty bottles of vintage port, and the price of even divinely mature vintages resolutely lags way behind that of red bordeaux of similar age and made in so much greater quantity.

In the light of all this I was extremely surprised by the wholesale leap in to investing in Tokaji that we saw after the fall of the Soviet Union when the likes of AXA Millésimes (owners of Ch Pichon Longueville and Quinta do Noval), the owners of Vega Sicilia and even my wine writing colleague Hugh Johnson all dashed to acquire a stake in this historic wine region in north-east Hungary. A wine high in sugar and acid and, often, with a hint of sherry-like oxidation, did not on the face of it seem to me to be a natural runaway success with 21st-century wine drinkers, but presumably it was Tokaji's legendary revitalising properties that provided the initial lure. I believe that after these hasty marriages in the early 1990s there has been a certain amount of repenting at leisure.

All of which is such a shame because fine sweet wines are never easy or cheap to make. Perhaps it's because most inexpensive sweet wine has been pretty awful - more awful relatively than the average inexpensive dry wine. I'm thinking of sweetened up tired Rieslings and Liebfraumilch, or super-sticky and heavily sulphured Moscatel that was labelled 'Spanish Sauternes' before Europe demanded geographical truth in labelling. If a newish wine drinker is introduced to the idea of sweet wine via one of these examples, it is not surprising if they are put off for life.

What is heartening, however, is that today's wine drinkers can choose from some seriously well made inexpensive sweet wines. Australia is one obvious source, and Chile, South Africa and New Zealand are making increasing quantities of fine sweet wine too. Who would have thought that the inland vineyards of New South Wales would be able to deliver so many truly refreshing botrytised sweet whites - so long as there is a supply of irrigation water?

Another rich source of sweet wine, making very different wines from these bright, super-clean golden syrups from outside Europe, is Andalusia in southern Spain. The bodegas of Jerez are stuffed with ridiculously underpriced sherries, not a few of them rich and sweet, and delicious with cheese and nuts while being strong and sweet enough to stand up to even the richest chocolate-based desserts. And then the undersung region to the east of sherry country, Montilla-Moriles, is home to the [Pedro Ximenez](#) grape and the ocean of black, treacly PX made from it. Much of it is intense and complex with long ageing in barrel, and can usually be found at a remarkably low price per long-lasting mouthful. This dark nectar is delicious simply dribbled over vanilla ice cream. Meanwhile the vineyards of nearby Malaga are being spectacularly revived as a source of tanga, Muscat-based sweet wine - not to mention the Muscats of Languedoc-Roussillon and the caches of ancient Rivesaltes and Banyuls awaiting discovery by the outside world (see [Treacly treasure in Barossa and Roussillon](#)).

Then there are the Moscatos of Sicily and all the fascinating, classically inspired dried grape wines of Italy and Greece. All around the Mediterranean really characterful sweet wines are made, many of them seriously underpriced.

I fervently hope that the high prices of wines such as Eiswein, Icewine, Trockenbeerenauslese and Yquem don't put today's wine lovers off this great and utterly hedonistic category of wine. Drink them with foods that are slightly less sweet than they are - or serve a half bottle instead of a pud.

You can listen to me rabbiting on about sweet wines on BBC Radio 4 with Simon Parkes [here](#).