

Muscat

3 Sep 2008 by JR

The Muscat grape may not be thought of as one of the great international classics but its history is many times longer than that of such newcomers as Cabernet Sauvignon for example. It was almost certainly the grape variety referred to by writers in classical times as being particularly attractive to insects for its heady smell and impressive ripeness. Muscat grapes are also distinguished by, uniquely, producing wines that actually taste and smell of grapes.

But, as one might expect of a grape variety known to the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Muscat family is particularly diverse and ramified.

The most noble sort of Muscat is that with small, pale yellow- skinned berries, known in French as Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains and in Spanish as Moscatel de Grano Menudo. In Italy it may be called Moscato d'Asti, Moscato di Canelli or simply Moscato Bianco. Its other aliases include Muscat of Frontignan, Muscat Lunel or Muskateller. This sort of Muscat is capable of producing wines with real finesse and a particularly pure, floral sort of grapiness. The grapes can have a particularly golden hue which is why it is sometimes called Gelbermuskateller or Moscato Giallo but there are also mutations with darker- skinned grapes, ranging from pink through red to pale brown. Indeed some of the finest wines of all made from Muscat are made in Australia from a very deep- coloured variant called Brown Muscat.

This sort of Muscat is almost certainly the grape variety with the longest history of any vine known today and was probably the most common vine imported into southern Gaul by the Romans. By the middle ages, when the strong, sweet wines it is well capable of making (and those still most revered in Greece) were particularly popular, it was already well established in Roussillon and in Piemonte and was the first documented variety in both Germany and Alsace. Its extent in such relatively cool wine regions is curious since this Muscat buds notably early, putting it at risk of spring frost damage in all but the warmest climates. A tiny acreage of small- berried Muscat, called (Gelber) Muskateller is still grown in Germany but it is dwarfed by the blousy modern crossing Morio Muskat which contains not a single Muscat gene.

Today Muscat is widely grown in north west Italy where it most often produces light (sometimes only 5 per cent alcohol), slightly fizzy, sweet, grapey wines labelled Asti or, superior, Moscato d'Asti. These flirtatious liquids can be popular drinks in the middle of the afternoon, or as refreshers at the end of a meal. My friend and colleague Michael Broadbent is a great believer in this latter function.

The small- berried Muscat is the most common sort of Muscat found in southern France too, either in strong golden syrupy vins doux naturels labelled Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise, Frontignan or Lunel; or in super- fruity, frothy Clairette de Die; or in strong tawny, raisiny liquids labelled Muscat de Rivesaltes from a large area in Roussillon. To my palate the most refreshing southern French Muscat vin doux naturel comes from a small area between Minervois and St Chinian called St Jean de Minervois. So much Muscat is planted in the south of France in fact that there has been a fashion for making it into dry white table wines, full- bodied whites with an eerily grapey aroma but hardly any perceptible sugar on the palate. Muscat du Cap Corse made from this particular Muscat in the far north of Corsica was for long one of the island's most impressive wines.

Even today, the finest Greek Muscats, from Samos and Patras and occasionally Cephalonia, demonstrate this vine variety's aptitude for a hot mediterranean climate - though the finest wines come from north- facing vineyards at altitudes above 300m so that some freshness is preserved.

But perhaps the greatest wine produced from this member of the Muscat vine family is Rutherglen Muscat, sticky Brown Muscat juice fortified and wood- aged in often boiling hot tin sheds in the far north west of the state of Victoria. Nearby Glenrowan produces similar wines and they all taste like a particularly tooth- rotting cross between madeira and liquid fruit cake. With serious age in cask they can be as haunting as any port.

The most planted sort of Muscat vine in Spain is the rather coarser member of the family, Muscat of Alexandria, otherwise known as Muscat Gordo Blanco or Muscat Romain. This has larger berries and less finesse - more orange conserve than orange blossom. If Muscat Blanc is thought to have originated in ancient Greece, this larger- berried version is thought, as the name suggests, to have come from Egypt. It is responsible for a host of often rather sickly Moscatels in Spain and the usually rather more invigorating Moscatel de Setubal in Portugal. Joao Pires was an early dry Muscat- based table wine, made in Portugal by an Australian.

In the 1970s and even 1980s, some of Australia's widely planted Gordo Blanco (sometimes called Lexia, from Alexandria) was made into basic table wine but this is much less common today. As Hanepoot, this is South Africa's most commonly planted Muscat, though there is also some small- berried Muscat, called here Muscadel, which is responsible for the famous Vin de Constance, a modern reproduction of the historic wine of Constantia.

Muscat of Alexandria is also widely planted in Roussillon and can be found in many a Muscat de Rivesaltes, as well as in Banyuls and Maury, the southern French answers to port - blended with Grenache of various hues and possibly Muscat Blanc.

Muscat of Alexandria is the most common Muscat nowadays around the eastern Mediterranean although the majority of the vines are grown for fruit and raisins rather than for wine. In southern Italy and around Sicily, however, the vine is responsible for a host of sticky dessert wines, including the fashionable Moscato di Pantelleria and Moscato di Lipari. The contrast between these syrups and the grapey froth also produced from Muscat in the north west of Italy could hardly be greater.

A third member of the Muscat family, Muscat Ottonel, predominates in the old Hapsburg empire in eastern Europe (whereas Muscat Blanc was the Muscat of choice in the old Russian empire, as ancient and long- lived Muscats of several colours from the Massandra imperial winery in Yalta attest). This 19th century crossing bred in the Loire from the table grape Chasselas and a lesser local Muscat is far from the most positively- flavoured Muscat, although it has been known to produce the odd impressive late harvest example in Austria's Burgenland. In Romania it is known as Tamioasa Ottonel whereas Muscat Blanc is called Tamioasa Alba. In Hungary where it is widely grown Muscat Ottonel is called Muskotály while Muscat Blanc, grown almost exclusively around Tokaj, is called Lunel or Sárga Muskotály (yellow Muscat). Many of these eastern European Muscat- based wines have little to recommend them other than a vague grapiness but the number of exceptions is increasing.

Although Muscat Blanc was the original Muscat of Alsace, Muscat Ottonel has been usurping that position because it is so much easier to grow. Serious Muscat d'Alsace is more difficult to find than serious Alsace wines made from Riesling, Pinot Gris and Gewurztraminer but they do exist.

Muscat Hamburg is a table grape but has been vinified in its time, and Muscat Bailey A is a Japanese speciality.

One important role of Muscat today is as a blending ingredient. A small proportion has added aroma and the impression of fruitiness to a host of wines, including White Zinfandel in California, Gewurztraminer in Alsace and elsewhere and cheaper bottlings of white Rhone varieties such as Viognier.

Some top Muscats

Zind Humbrecht Muscat Goldert, Alsace

Chambers Rare Rutherglen Muscat, Australia

Morris Rare Rutherglen Muscat, Australia

Muscat du Cap Corse, Domaine Antoine Arena or Clos Nicrosi or Gioielli, Corsica

Muscat de St Jean de Minervois, Domaine de Montahuc

Vin de Constance, Klein Constantia, South Africa

Muscat Paraparoussis (preferably 1998) Rio- Patra, Greece (more info from info@paraparoussis)

Samos Anthemis (preferably 1998) Samos, Greece

(from the Samos co- op, biggest importer Ets Jarousse of Issy- le- Moulinaux outside Paris)