How to drink sweet wine

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When did you last drink wine? Almost certainly within the last few days if you are reading this.

When did you last drink sweet wine though? Chances are that even the most enthusiastic wine lovers may have to stop and think about this. Sweet wines have somehow become increasingly isolated from mainstream wine consumption. They very obviously contain sugar, an ingredient we have been taught to revile – although we spend a fortune on processed foods gratuitously laced with it. Fine chocolate has never been more popular or fashionable. Why not fine sweet wine?

One obvious problem is that for some reason we are schooled to despise wines that are sweet, perhaps because the most démodé wines of all - Liebfraumilch, mass market Lambrusco, cheap Spumante and the like - are all sweet. Sophistication equals dryness is the prevailing belief.

Except of course that really sophisticated and knowledgeable wine lovers are enormous enthusiasts of great sweet wines, even if few of them manage to fit them easily and often into their daily lives. The big problem is that we tend to force sweet wine into a corral at the end of a meal, something to be drunk only with puddings and desserts which themselves are viewed as an infrequent indulgence.

A small group of producers of some of the world's finest sweet wines has now banded together to try to change all this. They know all too well how much more difficult it is to sell top quality sweet wine than it is to sell top quality red or dry white wine. Château d'Yquem, the world-famous property that dominates the Sauternes region of Bordeaux in every sense, has just released its latest vintage at a record low price, under £70 a bottle. This is only partly because 1999 is hardly its most glorious vintage. It is also because great sweet wine is the hardest of all to sell.

This has always seemed unfair to me because great sweet wine is also the hardest of all to make. There are many ways to make sweet wine. At the bottom end of the scale, producers simply add concentrated grape juice, and/or sometimes sugar, to wine stripped of any ability to re-ferment or evolve. Or alcohol can be added to sweet fermenting grape juice to stop the fermentation as is done at the first stage of making port. In cooler wine regions sugar may be added to the grape must before fermentation to boost the eventual sugar level after fermentation is stopped by chilling or stunning the yeast with sulfur dioxide. Or, more nobly, grapes can be deliberately left on the vine to shrivel into super-sweet raisins which are then persuaded to ferment into sweet wine. Italy and Greece make particularly fine examples of these dried grape wines – Vin Santo and Recioto among them. And finally there is icewine, or Eiswein, wine that owes its sweetness to grapes concentrated by having been left to freeze on the vine so that chunks of ice are left in the press.

But as Egon Müller of Germany put it at last week's sweet winefest in London, "with Eiswein you just have to get up early in the morning – making Beerenauslese is *difficult*". Sweet wines such as Germany's Beerenauslesen and Trockenbeerenauslesen or top quality Sauternes depend for their sweetness on a strange, capricious and distinctly unappetising-looking mould called botrytis, or noble rot, which can either change ripe grapes into precursors of fabulous, long-living nectar or, if conditions are unpropitious, may simply leave them rotting on the vine. To make seriously good sweet wine from botrytised grapes involves expensive risk-taking, co-operative weather, and many passages of pickers through the vineyard, picking grape by grape, often over many weeks. The resulting juice is difficult to ferment and needs careful nursing in the cellar. It is hardly surprising that these wines are not cheap.

Those who go to the trouble of making botrytised wine feel, understandably, several cuts above those whose wines are sweet for other reasons, which is presumably why the event in London last week was called the world's first Botrytis Forum - although there is already a similar organisation within France called Sapros, which is perhaps why none of the French invitees responded. Nevertheless the organiser, Hungarian-born wine importer Akos Forczek, managed to assemble visitors from Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, Russia, Sweden and Austria to listen to leading German producer Egon Müller, Alexandre de Lur Saluces of Château de Fargues (and Yquem until the recent LVMH takeover), and the respective sweet wine stars of Austria and Hungary, Alois Kracher and István Szepsy respectively.

This heavyweight group of sweet wine producers told us all about their techniques, achievements and ambitions. They wooed us with, among other more youthful elixirs, Château d'Yquem 1950, Scharzhofberger Auslese 1949 and Kracher's Welschriesling Trockenbeerenauslese 1981, all of which tasted far more youthful and intense than any dry wine of the same age (for obvious historical reasons no truly great version of Hungary's famous Tokaji wine was made between 1945 and 1989).

But their main message was basically "Here we are! Please take notice of us! Drink our wines!"

Lur-Saluces seemed to think that nomenclature and menu prejudice are the main problems. He dislikes the term 'sweet wines', shudders at the Australian term 'stickies' and does not even approve of the term 'dessert wine'. "The worst thing of all is to have Yquem with dessert. Many other [savoury] things can be tried with a good, creative chef. Oysters is something very classic that we're rediscovering in France, then there's lobster and so on. Turbot mousseline is marvellous. Poultry, pheasant, chicken are all good and then also we can have blue cheeses which are very good and there we have made a whole meal.

"We can try some desserts," he acknowledged grudgingly, "for example Richard Olney [the late monographer of Yquem] was promoting blancmange, or any dish with almonds. But I dislike to see coming the pastry chef. He must be locked in a room, We must not see him for our wines." What he is referring to is the common phenomenon whereby rich, sweet food tends to overwhelm the sweetness in wine.

I also feel that sweet wines are unjustly ignored by the modern wine drinker (and by producers in many important wine regions) but I am not sure that the Comte de Lur Saluces (no stranger to foie gras, one of Yquem's classic partners) is the ideal ambassador. He could hardly have more great wine under his belt but I fear he may be slightly out of touch with the typical modern wine drinker. At the Botrytis Forum he happily cited as the ideal enthusiast someone who could organise tastings of Yquem with 50 or perhaps 100 vintages at a time, and for him the crucial person in instigating the sweet wine revolution is a three star chef rather than anyone inhabiting a more modest kitchen.

While fully comprehending why botrytised wines are the aristocrats of the sweet wine firmament, I wonder whether the likes of Lur Saluces, Müller, Kracher and Szepsy would not naturally benefit from a rather more inclusive sweet wine promotional push? Not everyone can afford the scores of pounds, sometimes hundreds of dollars, a bottle required to secure one of their great wines. But then not all lesser sweet wines are bad.

I also think there is a problem with nomenclature. Botrytis, most unfortunately, is not an appetising word. It is an infection and it sounds like it. Let's just hear it for sweet wine drinking in general, and start experimenting with some more

adventurous food combinations. Some advice on food matching on a back label would not go amiss.

What to eat with sweet wine

Parma ham or similar

Foie gras or any rich pâté or terrine

Chicken or fish in a cream sauce

Roquefort or any blue cheese

Mature cheddar or any hard, salty cheese

Apricots (especially with Tokaji), pears

Strawberries, raspberries unadorned

For detailed tasting notes on an amazing vertical tasting of Yquem from 1784 to 1991, see purple pages