

Sweet wines - so much more than Sauternes now

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Until recently the range of sweet wines on offer in the UK at least, was seriously limited. Other than bottled wines such as various ports, sherries and madrieras, we could choose from very sticky Spanish Moscatels, heavily sulphured Late harvest and Sauternes of extremely varied quality but pretty high prices.

Now not only has the quality of these classic sweet wines improved enormously, we have also started to see good sweet wines available at relatively modest prices from the southern hemisphere, as well as the odd Canadian (caveat re rather steep prices). This is partly due to the conclusion of agreements between the EU and various New World countries which now allow them to export naturally sweet wines to Europe. This new flowering of tempting and original sweet wines may also be due to a spirit of creativity on the part of both producers and importers. I think it unlikely to have been inspired by demand from the average wine consumer who has long seemed discouragingly unexcited about sweet wines.

Australia is perhaps the most obvious source of well-priced, easy-to-try sweet wine, with The Barnet's Noble One being an early entrant. Today we can choose from a wide range of almost infinite sweeteners has been concentrated by botrytis, or noble rot, that is the result of foggy autumn mornings in the irrigated inland wine regions of Australia, notably Riverina in New South Wales. Good however, even the makers of Yellow Tail, the most successful wine brand in recent wine trade history, can beat **Tesco Private Label Barytis Semillon 2004 South Eastern Australia** (£5.40 per half bottle, Tesco) which is bursting with unobscured fruit, checked by zippy acidity and even displays the telltale rather cabbagy smell of botrytis.

More refined and zesty than this, but with even more obvious botrytis influence, is **Tanor Ridge Limited Release Barytis Riesling 2005 Tasmania** (about £12 a half from Lay & Wheeler, Great Western Wine, Coler Dore). This is much lighter and racier, with just one per cent alcohol and is a recommended partner for brussels lent with apple shredded by wine-loving restaurant Roger Jones of The Flame. Like Bodegas, steward of our members' forum.

Australia's traditional sweet wine strength, though being apparent in this context, was so-called Liqueur Muscat and Tokay, each aged essence of these grapes matured for years in cask in boiling hot sheds in north east Victoria so that they eventually taste like a cross between grape syrup, madiera and molasses. A first growth example of the style is **Chambers Rosewood Rutherglen Grand Muscat** (£24.45 a half Lay & Wheeler) which offers the sensation of drinking creamy rum toddy, quickly followed by burnt gold. This is Australia's single most distinctive wine style; only Australia's Pedro Ximénez (see below) is nearer.

Magnific has unearthed a bargain example of the style in **Buller's Fine Old Muscat NV Victoria** (£5.50 Magnific), the price applying to a full-size, if not exactly sophisticated-looking, bottle. The lovely rose-pink colour suggests the great age of a Rutherglen Muscat and on the palate there's that molten brussels toddy sensation with a little of the racio tang that comes from prolonged cask ageing. Magnific has also tracked down an exceptionally well-priced sweet wine from South Africa in the creamy punchy **Almond Grove Noble Late Harvest Riesling 2006 Robertson** which is only £6.99 a half bottle (£4.99 if two are bought). This is not for keeping, but it is extraordinarily easy to dispose of.

Another sweet wine that could open the floodgates for an influx of creative Spanish alternatives to all that golden Moscatel is **Casa de la Emília, Dulce Viejo 2005 Jurella** (£5.95 Sblendon, who are moving on to the 2006 vintage). This bright orange essence of the Condrieu grape certainly isn't subtle but it has good acidity to counterbalance its slight sweetness. This is quite a bargain for the strong headed.

Of course the more classic Spanish style is tricky PX, most of it from the Montilla-Moriles region. **Alvar Pedro Ximénez Anada 2004 Morilla-Moriles** (£8.95 per 500 flask, Gamma Wine) and a recent wine of the week is a particularly fine example that manages to be refreshing as well as unobscured.

Just over the French border, Roussillon has long produced a wide range of stunning sweet wines, aged for years and practically given away. **Arnaut de Vilanova, Hors d'Age 1982 Rhodézais** (£10.99 per 500 (Bibiana)) may be rather intriguingly named but it's great value for a Muscat blend that is nearly a quarter of a century old. It is clearly the super-grapey product of heat and long slow ageing and what counterbalances the extreme sweetness in this case is not acidity but tannin.

This principle is taken to an extreme in a French wine from rather further north, **Marie-Louise Baril, Tante's Vin de Liqueur**

(£12.95 Caves de Pyrénées) which tastes like a sort of super-tannic cross between claret and port that is bracingly fresh and clean. Made from Tannat grapes grown near Cahors, chosen by Andrew Jefford as his Absolutely Cracking Wine from France, it is recommended with dark chocolate.

It could hardly be more different from the unobscured golden charms of a good Sauternes, and there are lots of these to choose from, the style being unfortunately far from ubiquitous. One of the best priced is **Ch. Monbelle 2005 Sauternes** (£7.95 a half Lay & Wheeler) which is so big and rich it could happily take on Ropiquet, but shows none of the slightly musty or sulphurous smells that so often betray cheap Sauternes. Berry Bros are offering the fully matured **Ch. Spilva Robert 1997 Sauternes** at £19 a half and this rich, rewarding wine is a fine example from an excellent vintage that is already a great pleasure to drink. One of the better buys at Aldi supermarkets currently is the thoroughly grown-up, concentrated and luscious **Ch. Haut-Siergères 2002 Sauternes** at £9.95 per half.

Even better value, from Loire Chenin Blanc grapes, is **Domäne Cady, Les Charvignes 2002 Coteaux du Layon**

(£7.95 a half TheWine) which provides a lovely refreshing beach of summer with some botrytis and a lot of sweetness. From a very successful vintage and producer, this is for both heavy or super-fanatics, so should not be served with anything too sweet - a fruit but perhaps.

Slightly not yet properly sweet is **Domaine de Montezinho, Grapes d'Or 2004** Arzacqes (17.00 Leon Destrak, www.jancisrobinson.com)

is perfect with maize peas, so long as the party is not too sweet.

Bava Moscato d'Asti Fizzante (0.95 Berry Bros) is particularly light bodied - just 4.5 per cent alcohol - a super-refreshing grapey froth for mid afternoon drinking from the Pinotino family that takes sweet things in general and chocolate in particular so seriously. Berry Bros can also offer a great concentrated sweet red Italian made from semi-dried grapes in the form of **Corte Sant'Ale 2003 Racine delle Vajpottelle** (25 per 55c) which would be a wonderful match with cheese.

Surprised in Austria has all manner of super-rich sweet wines that are best drunk young. **Feder-Adinger Eisenach 2004** (25.00 a half litre) and **Feder-Adinger Ruster Ausbruch 2004** (11 a half litre) & (later) are particularly fine examples.

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for international examples.