

Strong, sweet and delicious

12 Dec 2008 by Jancis Robinson/FT though this is slightly longer

This is the time of year when there really is no excuse not to open bottles of wines that are stronger and sweeter than the norm, and here are some that are looking especially delicious or especially good value at the moment.. All prices given are for standard 75cl bottles unless otherwise stated and wines are grouped by style rather than price. There is substantial coverage of sherry, port, Madeira and Vins Doux Naturels elsewhere on this site.

STRONG AND DRY

At 15% alcohol, the lightest, palest and driest sherries, Fino and Manzanilla, are hardly stronger than many a table wine nowadays but they are invaluable at this time of year as an appetite-restorer. Two surefire successes – one mass market and one aimed squarely at any wine connoisseur – are listed immediately below.

Gonzalez Byass, Tio Pepe Fino Sherry

Utterly dependable palate cleanser and a super-fresh, tangy wine that is great with tapas dishes. 15%
£7.99 *Taurus Wines*, £8.95 *The Wine Society*

Equipo Navazos, La Bota de Manzanilla 8 Las Canas NV Manzanilla Sherry

Intensely thrilling single cask of condensed sea air. 15%
£18 *Theatre of Wine*

Sainsbury's Taste the Difference 12 Year Old Oloroso Sherry

Sainsbury's table-wine range seems a bit lacklustre at present but some of the strong wines are excellent. Brilliant value for cheese and nuts – ridiculously cheap! Dry but rich. 19%
£6.99 for 50cl *Sainsbury's*

Tesco Finest 12 Year Old Oloroso Sherry

Like the Sainsbury's version, excellent value even if slightly more timid. 19%
£6.99 for 50cl 76 *Tesco stores*

Fernando de Castilla, Antique Oloroso Sherry

Nutty, lavender-perfumed 20-year-old elixir, for consommé or cheese, from a bodega renovated by the Norwegian ex-export director of Osborne. 20%
£20 for 50cl *Waitrose Wine Direct and 2 branches*

Lustau, Emperatriz Eugenia Rare Oloroso Sherry

Heady, light, quite dry and very zesty 20-year-old. Good for getting the appetite going. Pretty chewy on the end. 20%
£20 *Waitrose Wine Direct and 2 branches*

Gonzalez Byass, Apostoles Palo Cortado Sherry

Rich, medium sweet with nuts and raisins and a dry finish. Tangy and vibrant. 20%
£14.49 for 37.5cl *Waitrose Wine Direct and 11 branches*

SWEET WINES

La Spinetta, Bricco Quaglia 2007 Moscato d'Asti

Nothing like Asti, but one of the finest versions of this grapey, featherlight, lightly fizzy Piemontese delicacy. 4.5%
£11.49 *Grape Passions*

Acinatum, Suavia 2005 Recioto di Soave

Italy, particularly the Veneto in the north east, makes some of the nerviest sweet wines in the world. Very tangy and exciting. Great life and spine. 13.5%
£20.99 for 37.5cl *Bibendum Wine*

Villa di Monte 1990 Vin Santo del Chianti Rufina

Sappy wine that is not that sweet (serve with cheese?), having been aged for more than 10 years in tightly sealed little barrels. 17%

£14.99 for 37.5cl major M&S stores

Fattoria di Basciano 2002 Vin Santo del Chianti Rufina

My other favourite Italian sweet wine style – also made from dried grapes. Orange and luminescent. Tangy and slightly rancio but wonderfully exciting and nervy. Great stuff – liquid almond paste! 16%

£19.91 for 37.5cl Bibendum

A Mano, Aleatico Passito 2007 IGT Puglia

Smart thinking from the American who has done so much to put Puglian wines on the map. Very dark crimson and lovely intense interest on the nose of this grapily sweet red Muscat. Vibrant and well balanced. Serve cool with fresh goat's cheese. 13.5%

£15 for 50cl Cooden Cellars

Huet Vouvrays

Waitrose offer limited quantities of three of these organic, honeyed, super-crisp marvels - from a 2002 demi-sec (good with creamy fish dishes) to a gloriously super-sweet 1989. All 12.5%

£22 to £85 Waitrose Wine Direct and a handful of stores

Dom Rotier, Renaissance 2006 Gaillac Doux

Very full, sweet, round and ready – honey and quince flavours and so unlike golden syrup. They say keep it for 10 years but why do you need to? A gold medal winner. 14%

£12.50 for 50cl Vine Trail

Jeff Carrel, Ultime Récolte 2006 Vin de Table

Wonderfully wacky. Late harvest Viognier that manages to be tangibly refreshing – a hint of Jurançon tang with real length and a hint of tobacco on the finish. Enjoy this with a cigar as the winemaker suggests...? 13%

£13 The Real Wine Company

Fleur d'Or 2005 Sauternes

Very competent blend. Good value.

£9.99 for 37.5cl Coulters of Bristol

Chateau La Tour Blanche 1995 Sauternes

Full, classic sweet white Bordeaux that already smells of flowers. Lots of burnt caramel sweetness. Conscientious wine. 14%

£12.63 for 37.5cl Bibendum Wine

Chateau Suduiraut 1989 Sauternes

Heady and rich and extremely serious. Quite lively enough but with great burnt density. Very long. Drink any time in the next 15 years. Classic stuff with lots of intriguing bottle age. 14.5%

£22.42 for 37.5cl Bibendum Wine

Cypres de Climens 2002 Barsac

This second wine of Ch Climens has great class and is tasting beautifully at the moment - extremely rich.

£13.95 for 37.5cl H&H Bancroft

Huber Riesling Beerenauslese 2007 Traisental

Lovely, round, full and reverberating nobly rotten Austrian Riesling. 11.5%

£14.99 for 37.5cl Oddbins

Nittnaus Trockenbeerenauslese 2004 Burgenland

Really excellent TBA-like sweetness in this Austrian blend of botrytised Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc with sufficient acidity at the moment - golden syrup character plus refreshing greenness. 12.5%

£18.95 for 37.5cl Lea & Sandeman

Királyudvar, Cuvée Ilona 2003 Tokaj

Even the oak in Hungarian. Round with botrytis and really rather more like Sauternes than Tokaji. Lively tang. This botrytised cuvée is much less cloying than the Cuvée Lapis, but the labels are very similar. 11.5%

£33 for 50cl Waitrose Wine Direct and 2 branches

De Trafford Straw Wine 2005 Stellenbosch

A little simple on the nose but very rich and peachy on the palate. Really like essence of peach juice and thoroughly satisfying. Not complex but rewarding South African. 12.5%
£20.75 Bibendum Wine

Coriole, Racked Semillon 2006 McLaren Vale

Australians are some of the most inventive producers of sweet wine in the world today. The Sauternes grape is the raw material here. 8%
£7.99 Hedley Wright, £8.25 Vin du Van of Appledore for 37.5cl

D'Arenberg, The Noble Riesling 2006 McLaren Vale

Smells of raisins macerated in Earl Grey tea. Syrupy texture, Thick, sweet syrup rescued from being cloying by Riesling's freshness. Pretty OTT but great for now. 9.5%
£8.99 Hailsham Cellars, £9.95 winedirect.co.uk for 37.5cl

STRONG AND SWEET

Croix Milhas NV Rivesaltes Ambré

Fairly simply Roussillon Vin Doux Naturel but tangy and sweet – lot of aged character (three years in large old casks) but lively too, great stuff for easy drinking – so nutty, and so clean! 16.5%
£7.99 37.5cl 412 Tesco stores

Jean-Marc Lafage NV Rivesaltes Ambré

Very pale orange, lively with great balance. Punchier than the Tesco version with a hint of marmalade. Very slightly tannic. 15.5%
£13.74 for 50cl Bibendum

Dom Fontanel 1998 Rivesaltes Ambré

Heady, rich, sun drenched and utterly rewarding in a liquid raisiny way. Some rancio. Silly price. 16%
£11.95 Stone, Vine & Sun

Les Vignerons de Maury, Solera 1928 NV Maury

Nutty and lively with lots of freshness and rancio and great value. Not that sweet... very transparent though. Dry finish and some treacle but really, really great value. 17%
£13.22 Reid Wines, £13.50 The Wine Society for 50cl

Yalumba Museum Muscat NV Australia

This just the thing to serve with very sweet food for it's a dentist's delight – a massive syrup almost – all marzipan and molten brown sugar. Very big! 18%
£10.95 The Fine Wine Company, £10.99 Hennings Wine Merchants

Mick Morris Liqueur Muscat NV South Eastern Australia

Heavy, rich but with some rancio showing long ageing in warm cask – great value! Very, very sweet and treacly, but persistent with a certain rose petal aroma. Brown sugar melted. 18%
£6.99 50cl 598 Tesco stores

Alvear, Pedro Ximenez de Solera 1927 NV Montilla

Treacly rancio (the heady smell of extended barrel ageing) and great for cooking and pouring on ice cream as well as for drinking. 16%
£12.50 for 37.5cl The Harrow, Little Bedwyn

Williams & Humbert, 12 year old Pedro Ximenez NV Sherry

Sherry it is labeled although most of the grapes came from the Montilla region about which I wrote recently. Liquid treacle toffee. 18%
£11.50 Theatre of Wine

Sainsbury's Taste the Difference 12 Year Old Pedro Ximenez NV Sherry

Dark brown 12 year-old form Williams & Humbert.. Sweet, raisiny and tooth rotting. Really good value! 18%
£7.19 for 50 cl 251 Sainsbury's store

Fernando de Castilla Antique Pedro Ximénez NV Sherry

Thick and sweet. Molten brown sugar with a hint of roses. Good wine, though it certainly is capable of rotting the gums.

15%

£20 for 50cl Waitrose Wine Direct and 2 branches

Sainsbury's 10 Year Old Tawny Port

Pale rose colour. Slightly muddy nose but lovely balance on the palate – really silly price. Lots of chew on the finish. Try this with a chocolate dessert...? or on a cold night when you have a sore throat. 20%

£11.19 407 Sainsbury's stores

Noval 10 Year Old Tawny Port

Really refreshing and vibrant yet as soothing as a head massage. Superior stuff.

£15.17 Corks Out (www.corksout.com), £15.75 Richard Granger (www.richardgrangerwines.co.uk)

M&S 20 Year Old Tawny Port

Satisfyingly reminiscent of walnuts with lots of rancio character but mellifluously sweet too. From the maker of Taylor and Fonseca fine ports. 20%

£29.99 200 M&S stores

Tesco Finest Vintage Port 1994 Port

A Symington production. Are they mad to sell it at this price? Awfully good for the money – lively and tingly and actually quite dry on the finish. 20%

£15.99 474 Tesco stores

Sainsbury's Taste the Difference Vintage Port 2000 Port

Rich and scented and rather nervous. A Côte Rôtie of a port. Good price. You could enjoy this relatively light wine already. 20%

£19.99 302 Sainsbury's stores

Quinta do Vesuvio 1999 Port

This port wine farm restored by the Symington family is on top form. Very, very big and rich and slightly raisiny. But there is so much there. Dry finish. Very concentrated. Long. Really dry finish. Great vitality. Drink any time over the next 15 years. 20%

£32 Berry Bros

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