



Just Desserts

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DESSERT WINES IN GENERAL DON'T go in and out of favor as do certain grape varieties. Rather, they tend to be consumed more when life slows down such as vacations, holidays or as the finale to leisurely meals. Yet, for whatever reason, dessert wines are not currently as popular as they have been historically. As a result, prices for these elixirs have not kept pace with similar quality dry wines.

Having enjoyed several dessert wines over the recent holiday period, this seems to be a good time to focus on them. One category of these wines has already been discussed (see Port in QB, Jan/Feb 2008). Other dessert wines are less powerful (alcoholic) and are made differently. For example, many countries produce wines made from fruit other than grapes. These can be curiosities or very enjoyable, depending upon the producer but they are not the subject of this article.

While most of this review focuses on European offerings, interesting and very good sweet wines are also produced in Australia and Canada as well as the United States. Australia produces various examples, but the best value comes from R.M. Büller which offers Muscats that are consistently outstanding. Most of the United States production comes from sweeter style Rieslings, e.g., EOS Tears of Dew, while Canada is distinguished for one producer, Inniskillin, which is making some of the world's finest Ice Wines. Suffice to say

that near perfection conditions often exist near Niagara Falls, Ontario to produce this elixir.

Spain produces the great wine, Sherry. It is made by the solera system whereby some of the very old sherry is blended with successively newer vintages adding complexity and character to the wine. Sherry ranges from sweet to bone-dry (fino). Fino is used as an aperitif or with food. Favorites are Amontillado, a nutty full-bodied medium to dry style, Oloroso, a dry to medium dry and fragrant offering, and cream Sherry, which is a dessert wine.

Italy's most famous dessert wines include Vin Santo and Recioto which is made from grapes that are dried over several months before pressing, various Muscats, as well as Marsala from Sicily.

Germany produces a hierarchy of some of the greatest dessert wines. The most famous varietal is Riesling which ages longer than any white grape and more than almost any red. Other grapes such as Sylvaner and Scheurbe may be used. The dessert wines come from the increasingly sweeter and rarer levels of the official classification of German wines, i.e. Auslese, Beerenauslese, Trockenbeerenauslese, and Eiswein. While Ausleses can be successfully paired with foods other than desserts, the others are best consumed by themselves. Alternatively, these wines are great when eaten with apricots, peaches or fruit tarts.

The Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese are made from grapes which are left on the vine until

the berries are attacked by noble rot or botrytis cineria which causes them to become ever smaller due to evaporation. As a result, the remaining liquid becomes more concentrated. These wines are among the greatest treats. Eiswein is made from grapes left on the vines until they are frozen. Picked by dawn to preserve their frozen state, the frozen water is separated from the grapes and discarded leaving acids and sugar. The resulting liquid is very dense, pouring like olive oil. Eiswein is not sweeter than Beerenauslese due to the higher acidity, but these wines must be experienced to be believed.

Hungary offers a unique dessert wine, Tokay Aszú. This wine is produced from the Tokay grape and was the original dessert wine made in its style (c.1600). Tokay ages very well and the quality level is denoted by the number of Puttonyos (degree of sweetness, generally 3-6, depending on the percentage of botrytis affected grapes, which have been made fermented for 4-7 years). The wars of the Twentieth Century wreaked havoc with the production and quality of these wines from Hungary, but great strides have been made recently.

This article should be considered in context with the aforementioned one on Port as well as the French Fantasies piece (Nov/Dec. 2008) which focused largely on Sauternes, the greatest of which is Chateau d'Yquem. This is a good time to discover these undervalued, often world-class wines. A Santé! U