

A Sweet Tooth

What's the point of sweet wine? Once we've discovered the sophistication of tannic reds and bone-dry whites, most of us abandon the sticky stuff we associate with our first taste of wine. It's very unfashionable to admit to a sweet tooth, yet those in the know would say that we're missing the pure enjoyment of sipping a glass of good sweet wine.

There are three main approaches to making sweet wine. The first depends on the schizophrenic action of a fungus called *Botrytis cinerea*. This usually causes grey rot in wet weather (and much heartache to the grape grower). However, with just the right combination of nearly ripe grapes and fairly dry weather, but with just enough dampness (foggy mornings are ideal), the result is "Noble Rot". The fungal hyphae puncture the skin of the grapes to get at the sugars within, so the water evaporates and the berries shrivel. At the same time, a wonderful array of flavours develops, often described as honey, dried apricot, sultanas, marmalade and boiled cabbage (in a nice way). The problem with Noble Rot is uncertainty - some years it doesn't develop and others it just turns grey. It's also expensive as the grapes should be picked as individual berries and so pickers may go through the vineyard up to a dozen times and all for as little as a glass of wine per vine.

The first region to discover Noble Rot was Tokaji in north-east Hungary. This dates back to 1650 when the harvest was delayed due to threat of Turkish attack. The rotted Furmint grapes are called "Aszú" and are crushed to a sticky paste. It's traditionally measured in special buckets called "puttonyos" so the number on the label refers to the number of these buckets added to each cask of dry base wine, and hence the sweetness. In Germany, the picking of grapes affected by Noble Rot has been widespread since 1820. It's usually Riesling as its high natural acidity means the wines are very long-lived and remarkably fresh, rather than cloying. Austria too produces wonderful intense sweet wines, especially around Lake Constance. Both countries also make "Eisweins" where really ripe grapes are picked and pressed while still frozen, leaving the ice crystals behind. In Sauternes, it is Semillon that is the key ingredient - with its thin skin it is very prone to noble rot, but Sauvignon also provides essential acidity in the blend. Chenin Blanc is responsible for Loire stickies like Bonnezeaux, Coteaux du Layon and Vouvray Moelleux.

Another approach for making sweet wine is to use dried grapes - bunches are dried on straw-covered racks or hanging up in airy lofts. This tradition probably started in ancient Greece and still hangs on in wines like Samos Muscat, but is most famous in Italian wines like Recioto in Valpolicella and Soave, and in Passito wines like Zibobbo from the volcanic island of Pantelleria.

The third major method for making sweet wines is fortification. The idea is to add grape spirit midway through the fermentation to stop yeasts working and keep lots of sweetness and grape flavours. It's best suited to aromatic grapes like Muscat and is used in French Vin Doux Naturels like Muscats from Beaumes de Venise, Frontignan and Rivesaltes. The luscious syrupy Aussie Liqueur Muscats are made by this method too.

One sip of any of these wines and you'll see they are miles away from sugary plonk. Such cheap nasty stuff is made by adding grape concentrate to base wine and needs lots of sulphur dioxide to keep it stable - it's a completely inferior animal to the sweet classics - once you've tried them you'll be hooked.

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