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**H**alloween kicks off the sweet season. Suddenly desserts and candies are fair game for two months, until New Year's Day resolutions shame us back onto the straight and narrow. It's also a time for sweet drinking, with egg-nogs, hot buttered rums and, of course, dessert wines. But when it comes to dessert wines, many wine drinkers find themselves at a loss. With such a wide spectrum of wines to choose from at varying levels of sweetness and price points, it can be a daunting category to tackle. Here's a tip to simplify things: Any wine sweet enough to pair well with dessert, or to serve in lieu of dessert entirely, can fairly be called (if not labeled) a dessert wine.

And just like any other wine, dessert wines are all about balance. That includes flavors, acidity, alcohol, tannins and sugar, and as long as a dessert wine balances these elements, it can be just as enjoyable as a well-crafted Pinot Noir or Chardonnay. Get to know this class of wine a little better, and you may realize that at your next dinner, you'll be saving the best for last.

# The Sweet Life

*Dessert wines are a perfect way to add a little extra sugar to your holidays*



Story by JIM CLARKE  
Photographs by LEAH NASH



# the Sweet and Low Down

**SERVING:** Most dessert wines are served in small glasses—a 2-ounce pour is typical, compared to the 5- or 6-ounce pour for table wines—especially for richer wines, as your palate has usually been through a lot by the end of the meal. If you don't have 2-ounce glasses around, a standard wine glass will work, and a small pour in a standard will actually allow you to better enjoy the wine's aromas. Dessert wines do not require any extra "breathing" time after opening.

**TEMPERATURE:** Broadly speaking, follow the same rules you would with a table wine: whites in the 40- to 50-degree range, reds just above 60 degrees. The richer and sweeter the wine gets, the less it needs to chill. So a light Auslese Riesling should go straight from the fridge to your glass, while taking an Ice Wine or Sauternes out of the fridge 15 minutes beforehand will give it a chance to show

off more. Don't serve fortified wines too warm, or the alcohol will dominate the nose too much—stay in the 60s. Sweet sparkling wines, like a demi-sec Champagne or a Brachetto d'Acqui, should be served very chilled, just like a dry Champagne.

**STORAGE:** Many dessert wines come in half-size bottles (375 ml.) to make them more affordable and because the serving portions are smaller. Nonetheless, most will keep well once opened (in the fridge, if they need chilling); the sugars (and, in some cases, higher alcohol) act as a preservative. This is especially true for Sauternes, Tokaji, Ice Wine, Port and Sherry. For example, Canada's Inniskillin says its Ice Wines stay fresh for up to six weeks after opening. Bubbly dessert wines like demi-sec Champagne or Moscato d'Asti, however, will only keep their effervescence for a day at best—but they're so easy to drink that storage probably won't be an issue.

## Running Late

The simplest way to make grapes sweet is to let them ripen longer than usual. But there's a catch: The acidity of the grapes can't diminish so much that they start to rot. So it helps to choose the right grape. Riesling, for one, is good at holding on to its acidity into late autumn, as are Chenin Blanc, Viognier, Gewürztraminer, sometimes even Chardonnay. Red grapes rarely make successful sweet wines this way.

In 2005, Alsace, like most French wine regions, had little to complain about, as a long warm spell in autumn allowed growers to let grapes hang on the vine as long as they wanted. That means plenty of Vendanges Tardives (or simply "VT") wines, as late-harvest wines are officially known in Alsace; Riesling, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and occasionally Muscat are the grapes of choice.

Most late-harvest wines aren't made in a super-rich style, so they're often a good choice when you want to pair a wine with less-sweet desserts. The **Marc Kreydenweiss Moenchberg Pinot Gris Grand Cru VT 2005** (\$75/750 ml.) shows great spice, baked pear and quince aromas; it's medium-bodied with a clean, almost crisp finish. For something less expensive, **Domaine Ostertag's Fronholz Muscat VT 2005** (\$25/750 ml.) captures a more floral style, with a medium body, moderate sweetness and some delicious stone-fruit notes on the finish. Both work well with fruit-based desserts, especially tarts or cobblers, but late-harvest wines usually aren't sweet enough to pair with richer desserts.

## Ice Skating

At harvest in the fall, a vineyard is usually buzzing with activity, as pickers move among the rows of vines, heavy with grapes and just-browning leaves. Fast-forward to December or even January, and some vineyards present a different harvest scene: It's the middle of the night, the ground is white with snow, and the grape pickers are wrapped in heavy parkas and thick gloves. The vines carry little beside the grape bunches that have survived the threat of rot and birds. But given those conditions, a meticulous winemaker can harvest the frozen grapes and carefully press them to remove the frozen water; what remains is concentrated sugar, flavor and acidity. Known as Ice Wines, these tend to be much richer than late-harvest wines, making them good matches for fruity desserts with a decadent touch of custard or cream.

Canada is one of the few places where wine producers can ripen grapes and still get freezing temperatures, crafting Ice Wines from Riesling, Vidal Blanc and even reds like Cabernet Franc. **Inniskillin** is generally credited for pioneering Canada's Ice Wine style. With juicy melon and tropical-fruit notes, its **Vidal Blanc Icewine 2006** (\$45/375 ml.) is excellent.

Ice Wine was discovered in Germany in the 19th century. According to legend, the grapes were left on the vine to give

farm animals fodder during the winter, but then were made into wine when people realized how sweet the grapes had become. Not every vintage yields the right conditions for Ice Wine (called Eiswein in Germany), so these are generally rare and expensive wines, with even half-bottles not usually available for less than triple figures. Neighboring Austria is able to make Ice Wine more consistently, and a bit more affordably. The **Weiss Grüner Veltliner Eiswein 2005** has a touch of white pepper characteristic to this indigenous grape, (\$22/375 ml.) which adds another note of complexity to its tropical fruit aromas and luscious sweetness.

Elsewhere, some wineries pass on the parkas and instead use cryogenic freezers to freeze grapes at the winery. In most major wine-producing countries, including the U.S., the products of such mechanizations can't legally be called Ice Wine, and they aren't as complex or opulent as the real thing. The **Pacific Rim** (formerly Bonny Doon) **2007 Riesling Vin de Glacière** (\$19/375 ml.) is a readily available example that's light and fresh, with a mix of fruity aromas. **Vidal Ice 2007** (\$25/375 ml.) from New York's Finger Lakes region, offers peach, pineapple and melon notes, plus a touch of almond.

## Rot Is Hot

Tokaji, Tokay, Tocaï: However you spell it, you're talking about the same thing. At least that's what the European Union has decided: In 2006, Hungary was granted all rights to the name Tokaji (pronounced "toe-KAI"). But while other regions that produce similar wines (such as Alsace and northeastern Italy) will have to change the descriptions on their bottles slightly, all of them are using the same general method to create a honey-inflected wine that was once prized by popes, French kings and anyone else with a sweet tooth.

Botrytis, also known as "noble rot," is key to the flavor of Tokaji and Tokaji-style wines. Under ideal conditions—humidity and fog in the morning, but drier, warmer conditions in the afternoon—this fungus afflicts grapes, sucking water out of them through microscopic holes. This has the same concentrating effect as freezing, but with a crucial difference. "With Ice Wines, you get fresh fruit character, because it preserves the original fruit flavors," says Bruce Nicholson, senior winemaker at Inniskillin. "But with botrytis wines, you get more of a honeyed character, because the botrytis adds its own flavors." These could include orange zest, dried apricot or even a smokiness.

These wines lend themselves to crèmes brûlées and other creamy desserts, but Laszlo Meszaros, managing director at Tokaji's Château Disznókő, says you don't have to wait until the end of the meal to enjoy them: "They are a superb match with exotic, spicy food, like Indian cuisine—the acidity and sugar counterbalance the spices—but also with more traditional pairings like foie gras, lobster, fish or poultry with a creamy sauce [that has] some acidity too, and blue cheeses."

Making Tokaji is a complex process. Not every grape in the vineyard gets infected with rot, so unaffected grapes are harvested separately and made into a dry wine. Then, tubs of sweet noble rot grapes are added to the dry wine, and the mixture is re-fermented. Historically, these tubs of sweet grapes were called *puttunynos*, and each puttunynos added to the mix made for a richer, sweeter wine. Today, Tokaji winemakers use more sophisticated tools for gauging the sugar content of their product, but the puttunynos system is still used on labels to announce the sweetness level of a bottle. A three-puttunynos wine will be moderately sweet, whereas a six-puttunynos will be the richest.

Try the **Château Pajzos 5 Puttunynos 1999** (\$40/500 ml.), which boasts Tokaji's classic mix of dried apricot, fig and honey aromas, with a velvety richness up front but cleansing acidity on the finish. For something lighter, the **Domaine Hétszölö Tokaji Aszú 3 Puttunynos 2000** (\$26/500 ml.) shows floral, mandarin and honey notes, with a lingering finish. Between these two, the **Royal Tokaji Red Label 5 Puttunynos 2003** (\$39/500 ml.) is light and almost crisp, with a nose full of honey laced with vanilla and a flavor of ripe peaches that resolves into a surprisingly tart grapefruit finish.

Other places make botrytized wines—notably Sauternes, Alsace and Germany—but Tokaji's are on a roll with the advances they've made since the fall of Communism. And the weather has helped. "1999 and 2000 in Tokaj were the best back-to-back vintages since 1811 and 1812," says Thomas Laszlo, winemaker at New York's Heron Hill and former winemaker at Château Pajzos. "The 1999 wines are higher in acid and flavor, but need more time than the 2000 vintage. The 2000 wines are completely different in structure: higher alcohol, lower acid, fuller, fatter wines. Drink the 2000 wines now, and hold onto the '99 wines."

## Dry Eyes

"With most dessert wines, the process of making them adds something," says Jason Haas, general manager at Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles, California. "Botrytis gives a flavor from the rot, fortified wines have added alcohol and late-harvest wines have a sun-dried, raisiny character. But two types have a pure way of getting that concentration: Ice Wine and *vin de paille* [straw wine]."

California doesn't get cold enough to make Ice Wine, but you've surely heard of California raisins. To make straw wines producers lay harvested grapes on beds of straw and let the wind dry the grapes for a couple of weeks—making raisins, essentially. The flavors and sugars concentrate, and the acidity doesn't diminish, since ripening stops once grapes leave the vine. In Italy, this process yields full-bodied, voluptuous wines: the red Recioto di Valpolicella, with its powerful aromas of dried figs, raisins and dates; and white wines like Recioto di Soave and Vin Santo, redolent

of melons, tropical fruits and exotic spice. France's Rhône Valley produces the occasional *vin de paille* from the white grape varieties Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne. The **Roberto Anselmi I Capitelli Passito Bianco 2003** (\$36/750 ml.) exemplifies the style with notes of melon, candied apple, yellow plum and a touch of almond on the finish. Try it with pastries or biscotti.

The Italian Recioto style inspired Tablas Creek to also try making a red straw wine alongside their Rhône-influenced whites, using Mourvèdre to make the **Vin de Paille "Sacrerouge" 2005** (\$45/375 ml.), a delicious experiment with lots of dark raspberry, blueberry and chocolate notes; a full body; and a long finish.

## Pump Up the Volume

When it comes to sweet wines, some winemakers like to let alcohol do the work for them, as in Port. Instead of waiting for raisins, fungus or freezing temperatures, producers add a neutral, flavorless brandy to the fermenting red wine when it hits about 7 percent alcohol by volume, quickly raising the alcohol level to 19 or 20 percent. This kills off the yeast, leaving the remaining grape sugars unfermented. Tannins, higher alcohol and sugar make Ports one of the most powerful styles of dessert wines, ideal for combating winter's chill.

While most Ports are non-vintage (the bottled wines are made by blending the wines of several different years), the exceptional 2003 vintage prodded many Port houses to "declare" a vintage and bottle some of the wine from that harvest on its own. The **Quinta de Roriz Vintage Port 2003** (\$60/750 ml.) has fantastic fig, date, licorice and floral notes right now, but it also makes a great holiday gift for someone's cellar, since it will age and develop for at least another 20 years. Non-vintage ruby Ports offer similar flavors at a more affordable price; the **Quinta do Noval LBV (Late Bottle Vintage) 2001** (\$20/750 ml.) isn't made to age as long, but instead is softer and ready to drink, similar to the Roriz but with more raspberry and cherry aromas.

Tawny Ports offer a less fruit-forward way to enjoy a fortified wine; the **Warre's 10-Year Otima** (\$19/750 ml.) shows how a long period of aging in wood can turn a wine away from fruit notes and toward delicious walnut, caramel and butterscotch aromas. Venturing further into Iberian culture, PX (Pedro Ximenez, the name of the grape used), Sherries yield darker fruit flavors, while Malmsey Madeira makes a play for the same nutty character that Tawny Port inhabits.

Pierre Montégut, technical director at Château Suduiraut in Sauternes, praises Port for its ease at the table, suggesting vintage Port with blue cheese or any hard, aged cheese, as well as with dark chocolate. For orange-inflected desserts, he recommends a Tawny Port. Any Brit will tell you that Ruby Port and Stilton cheese is a classic match, or you can think like Winston Churchill and pair it with a cigar. ■

A glass of red wine sits on a wooden table next to a plate of sliced figs and a wedge of blue cheese. In the background, a bottle of wine is visible, slightly out of focus. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, creating a cozy atmosphere.

# Sweets for the Sweet

## *What to pair with your dessert wines*

**LATE-HARVEST WINES:** For a Gewürtz, try a ginger spice cake or coconut cream pie. For a LH Riesling, try a fruit cobbler or bread pudding. For a Muscat, try brie, berries and cream, or crème brûlée.

**ICE WINES:** Fruit desserts with custard or cream; fruit-flavored cheesecakes; poached pears; sugar cookies.

**TOKAJI AND BOTRYTIZED WINES:** Strong blue cheese; tangy but creamy desserts like cheesecake or yogurt; coffee- or vanilla-flavored desserts; apple pie.

**VINS DE PAILLE:** Buttery desserts, such as pastries, cookies, strudel and baklavah; plum pudding.

**PORT:** Strong cheeses; dark chocolate; figs; spice cake; berry and cherry pies.