

Stirling Wines: Sweet Wines - Elixir of the Gods

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When you read this title, you may think I have taken leave of my senses. For many of us, our first taste of wine was sweet, or at best off dry; and with hindsight, it was woeful stuff, be it Liebfraumilch or Blush Zinfandel. But the wines I am going to highlight today all have a backbone of acidity, which means that the sugar content never becomes overpowering. Indeed this divine combination of acidity and just enough sugar makes them superb food wines, not just as dessert wines but with foie gras, blue cheese and many other delights.

The elixir of life was a mythical potion that granted the drinker eternal life and/or eternal youth. Now I can not make the same claims for the wines in this newsletter. But we do know that many of the wines that were famous in antiquity (such as the wines of the islands of Chios and Lesbos) were sweet wines made from partially dried grapes. So maybe it is not too much of a stretch to describe these high quality sweet wines as Elixir of The Gods.

The cheapest way, just add sugar or grape concentrate

The easiest and cheapest way to create a sweet wine is to just add sugar, or rather some form of sweet grape juice or concentrate or what is called unappealingly titled rectified grape must. In Germany, the unfermented grape juice is called Süssreserve and is the source of sweetness for Liebfraumilch, Niersteiner Gutes Domtal, Piesporter Michelsberg and many other cheap German white wines. Best we stop there and move on to the good stuff.

Arrested fermentation

Another technique often used for cheap French sweet wines is to start off with a grape juice that is very high in sugar, let it ferment to say an ABV of 11%-12% and then add a big slug of sulphur dioxide to knock out the yeast and preserve the wine from bacterial infection. Normally, these wines are as enticing as the Süssreserve wines of Germany.

However, there is one huge exception to this rule of thumb, the ethereal white wines of the Mosel and other quality regions of Germany. Strictly speaking, these wines are sweet in terms of residual sugar; but in these wines, the purpose of the sweetness is to balance the searing acidity, not the other way round. I could easily write an entire newsletter about these wines but we will have to make do

with a passing reference, and by way of example a Riesling Spätlese (more below) from Selbach Oster in the Mosel Valley (**Exhibit 1**).

Exhibit 1
Selbach-Oster

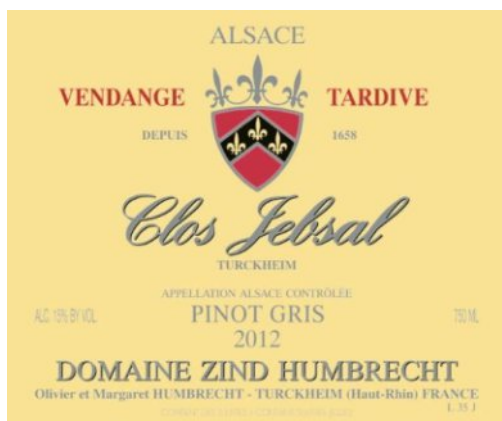


Source: Company images

Late harvest

In general, high quality sweet wines are created by concentrating the natural sugars in the grapes. Perhaps the easiest way to do this is by letting the grapes hang on the vines becoming partly raisined, the so-called late harvest method. In France this is called *vendange tardive* and is very common in Alsace. Very often Alsatian *vendange tardive* wines are based on the Riesling grape but there are also a number of very successful *vendange tardives* from pinot gris, see the example from top producer Zind Humbrecht (**Exhibit 2**).

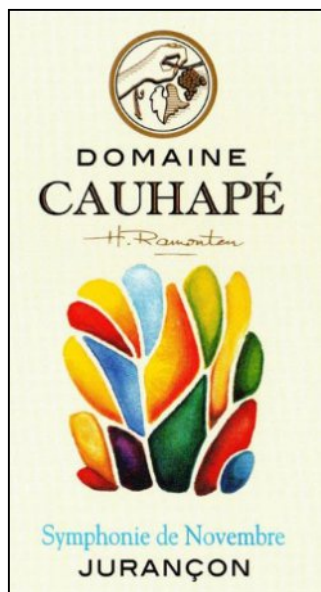
Exhibit 2
Zind Humbrecht



Source: Company images

The technique is also used elsewhere in France, for example in South West France near the foothills of the Pyrenees, in the appellation of Jurançon where they late harvest the local Petit Manseng grape (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3
Symphonie de Novembre from Domaine Cauhapé



Source: Company images

Historically, German wines have been gauged primarily on sugar content - not the sugar content of the wine but the sugar content of the grapes that were used to make the wine. The ranking goes as follows, from lowest sugar to highest:

Kabinett (tr literally cabinet)

Spätlese (tr late harvest)

Auslese (tr special selection)

Beerenauslese (tr special selection of individual grapes)

Trockenbeerauslese (tr special selection of individual, shriveled (literally dry) grapes i.e. botrytis-affected).

Spätlese wines will have no botrytis grapes (see below for further discussion), *Auslese* typically a mixture. These days some *Spätlese* and even *Auslese* grapes are fermented to dryness. But *Auslese* is particular are nearly always sweet wines, see the example from the Rheingau with a fantastic Gothic label from Freiherr Langwerth von Simmern (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4
Auslese Rheingau von Simmern



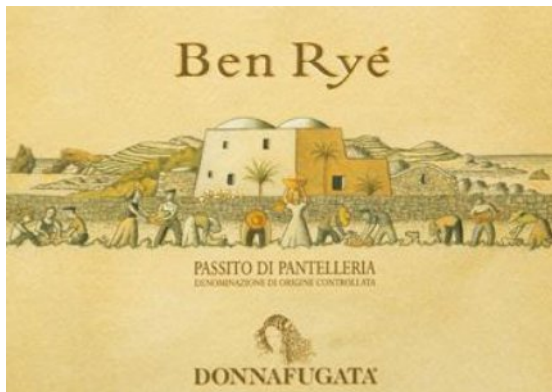
Source: Company images

In Italy, the harvest comes earlier and it is often too hot for late-harvesting. However, in Northern Italy (especially in Trentino, Alto Adige, Friuli, and Lombardy), grapes of aromatic varieties (such as Gewurztraminer, Moscato, Malvasia, Sauvignon & Riesling, and local ones) can be left on the vine to produce “vendemmia tardiva”.

Dried-grape wines

Given the hot climate, in Italy dessert wines are more typically made with “dried” grapes. The Italian name for these styles of wine is *passito* which is said to derive from the ancient Passum wine made in Carthage. Possibly the direct descendent of this wine is, the Passito di Pantelleria. This is made from the Zibibbo grape (the local name for Muscat of Alexnadria) on the island of Pantelleria between Sicily and North Africa. Some grapes are left on vine to dry and raisin, others picked and left to the sun. After twenty days of natural dehydration (“appassimento”), the weight of the grapes is reduced to 60% of the original weight. The grapes are then harvested, softly pressed and undergo a very slow fermentation. The resulting wine has sweet aromas of “dried apricots, figs, dates, raisin, candied orange peel, and honey”. A good example is Ben Ryé by Donnafugata (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5
Ben Ryé by Donnafugata



Source: Company images

A variation on this technique is also used in Spain, where grapes are picked and left to dry in the sun. Today most Spanish sweet wines are fortified wines (see below). But the famous wine-maker Telmo Rodriguez makes a 'pasera' wine from Moscatel (Spanish synonym for Muscat of Alexandria) in the Malaga area (**Exhibit 6**).

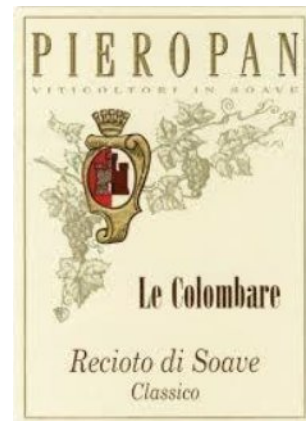
Exhibit 6
Telmo Rodriguez Malaga



Source: Company images

In Northern Italy, the grapes are traditionally dried on straw mats to make a sweet wine call Recioto, for example Recioto di Soave from the local Garganega grape which is a delicious fragrant wine in slightly lighter style than some of the wines we will discuss later (**Exhibit 7**).

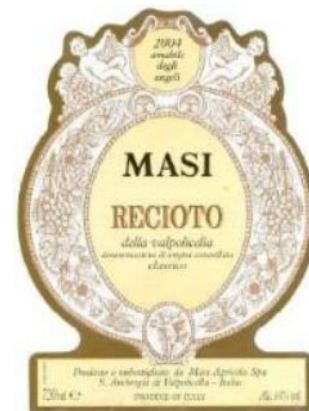
Exhibit 7
Recioto di Soave



Source: Company images

In the Valpolicella area of NE Italy, they also make wine from dried grapes (traditionally dried on straw mats but these days much more likely on trays). The twist is that the wines are made from red grapes (typically Corvina, Rondinella, Molinara). The most famous dried grape wine of this region is actually a dry wine - Amarone della Valpolicella, where the grapes are fully fermented to dryness (literally bitterness). However, the region also produces much smaller quantities of sweet red wine called Recioto della Valpolicella (**Exhibit 8**) which is the perfect accompaniment to many chocolate desserts.

Exhibit 8
Recioto della Valpolicella



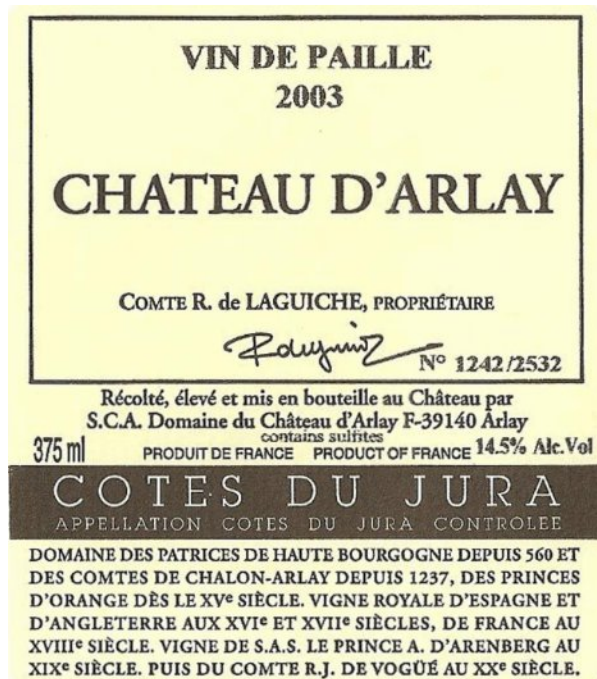
Source: Company images

Dried-grape wines are not limited to Italy. Commanderia in Cyprus claims decent from La Grande Commanderie of the Knights Templar, and is made from local grapes Mavro (red) and Xynisteri (white).

In France, they make delicious *vin de paille* (straw wine) in the Jura region (**Exhibit 9**), from Chardonnay and local grapes Savignin and Poulsard. However, because it's only 1% of the production of a small region, they are rarely found outside France.

Exhibit 9

Vin de Paille from Château d'Arlay

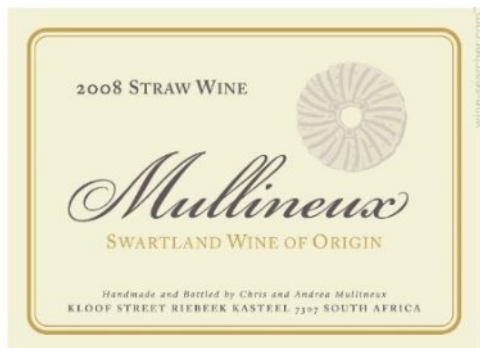


Source: Company images

In South Africa, de Trafford¹ were the pioneers of straw wine. And they have been joined by Mullineux, one of the country's up-and-coming stars making straw wine from Chenin Blanc grapes in Swartland (**Exhibit 10**).

Exhibit 10

Mullineux Straw Wine



Source: Company images

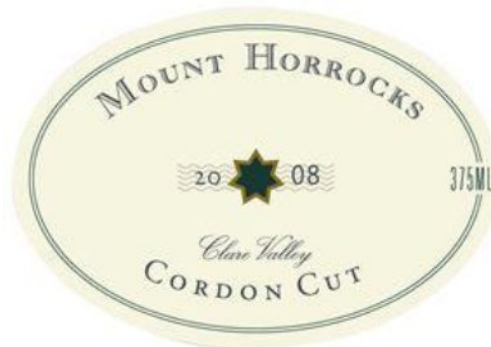
Cordon-cut

Before we leave dried-grape wine, I want to highlight a completely new wine technique to me. In ancient times, one of the ways of creating dried grapes was to twist the cordon of the vine to prevent sap getting to the grape. [To use a horrible analogy, a bit like twisting a forearm to break the nerve supply to the fingers]. And the name lives on in the Italy as Torcolato, a modern white Recioto made by Maculan (see below) from Vespaiola grapes.

In the Cordon-Cut technique, when the grapes are ripe, the canes are deliberately severed to encourage the grapes to shrivel on the vine for about seven weeks. The only producer using this technique as far as I am aware is Mount Horrocks in Australia's Clare Valley, who use the technique to superb effect on Riesling grapes (**Exhibit 11**) to produce an incredibly pure dynamic wine.

Exhibit 11

Mount Horrocks Cordon-Cut Riesling



Source: Company images

Botrytis

The apogée of the sweet wine world is in my opinion the world of botrytis. Now, botrytis sounds like and is a nasty fungal infection. However, in the topsy-turvy world of sweet wine, your enemy can become your friend. *Botrytis cinerea* in its malevolent form is known as grey rot and is a pest. But when it is mildly damp, under early autumn mist, *botrytis cinerea* can create something amazingly special. The noble rot (as it is called in English) covers the surface of the grapes and at the same time both gently dessicates the grape and adds amazing extra aromas.

Arguably, the world's best known sweet wine is Château d'Yquem from the Sauternes region of Bordeaux in SW France (**Exhibit 12**).

¹ See Stirling Wines from 10 Oct 13 [Stirling Wines: South Africa Revisited](#)

Exhibit 12
D'Yquem



Source: Company images

In Sauternes, Sémillon is the main grape (approx 80%), because it is especially susceptible to noble rot. Sauvignon Blanc has naturally high acidity and gives the wine freshness and Muscadelle adds aroma.

Sauternes is result of a very specific mesoclimate, close to two rivers, the broad Garonne and its small tributary, the Ciron. In autumn, when the cool spring-fed Ciron flows into the warmer tidal Garonne, evening mists cover the vineyards until late morning, when the sun burns the mist away. This moist atmosphere encourages *botrytis cinerea*.

No one is exactly sure when sweet wine production became the norm here but Thomas Jefferson bought wine from Ch D'Yquem.

Before D'Yquem was sold to LVMH in 1999 under acrimonious circumstances, it belonged to the Lur Saluces family, who still continue to own and produce exceptional Sauternes at Château de Fargues (**Exhibit 13**).

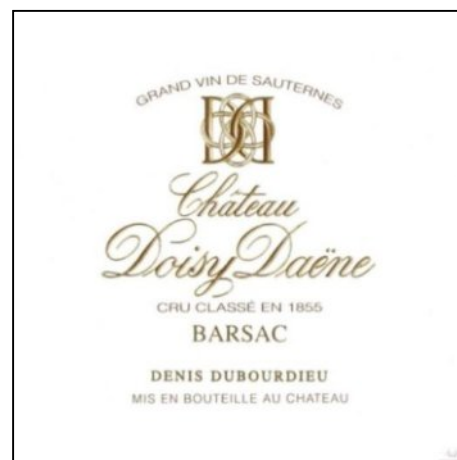
Exhibit 13
Château de Fargues from the Lur Saluces family



Source: Company images

If you can't afford the dizzy heights of Ch D'Yquem or even the more reasonable price of Ch de Fargues, try Ch Doisy Daëne (**Exhibit 14**). This property which straddles the two communes of Sauternes and Barsac is the family property of Denis Dubourdieu, professor of oenology who has advised some of the greatest properties in the world, including Cheval Blanc and Yquem.

Exhibit 14
Ch Doisy Daëne



Source: Company images

To the NE of Bordeaux, Montbazillac also produces botrytis wine at more reasonable prices than Sauternes, albeit nowhere near the same quality. Elsewhere in France, the Loire valley is a reliable source of good value botrytis wines, specifically the area around a small tributary of the Loire called the Layon, hence the name of the broad appellation, Coteaux du Layon. Two smaller areas are the source of the best wines in the area and have their own sub-appellations: Bonnezeaux and Quarts de Chaume. A personal favourite is Château de Fesles from Bonnezeaux (**Exhibit 15**).

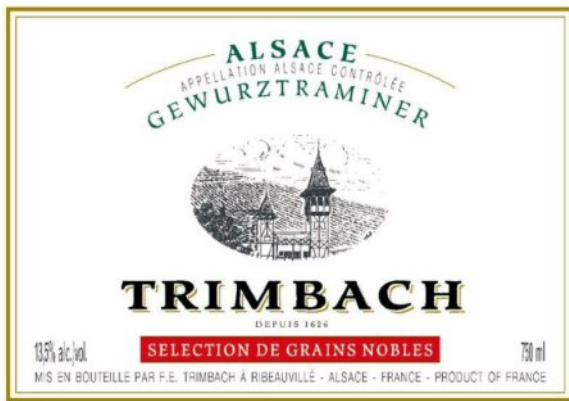
Exhibit 15
Château de Fesles Bonnezeaux



Source: Company images

The last area of France which I want to highlight is Alsace. Here botrytis wines are labelled *Sélection de Grains Nobles* (abbreviated to SGN, a term also used in the Loire). Often the SGN wines of Alsace are based on Riesling but many houses also make SGN Gewurztraminer which is divinely perfumed and intense, for example from the storied house of Trimbach (**Exhibit 16**)

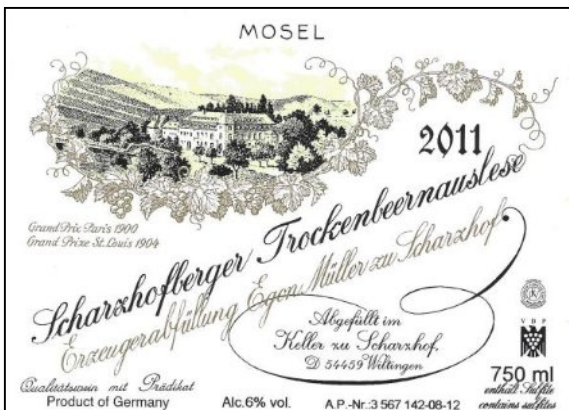
Exhibit 16

Trimbach Gewurztraminer Sélection de Grains Nobles

Source: Company images

The second famous source of botrytis wines is Germany, labelled as *beerenauslese* and *trockenbeerenauslese (TBA)*. These wines are made all over Germany from a variety of grapes. However, in my view, the very best wines are made from Riesling grapes in the Mosel area, where Egon Müller's Scharzhofberger TBA (**Exhibit 17**) sells for stratospheric prices, easily over \$5,000/bottle.

Exhibit 17

Müller Trockenbeerenauslese

Source: Company images

However, despite the fame of the botrytis wines of France and Germany, the first recorded history of botrytis wine-making was in the Tokaj region of Hungary, dating from approx 1650. According to history/legend, the wines were an accidental discovery when the winemaker on a particular

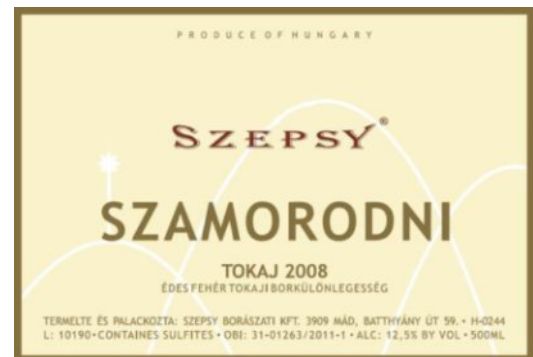
estate delayed the harvest because of the threat of attack by the Turks, which allowed the development of noble rot.

Tokaji is made from two grape varieties: Furmint and Hárslevelű. The original meaning of the Hungarian word *aszú* was "dried"; but just as in Germany the term came to be associated with "nobly" rotten grapes.

The process of making Aszú Tokaji wine is as follows. Aszú berries are individually picked, then collected in huge vats and trampled into a paste (known as aszú dough). Must or wine is poured on the aszú dough and left for 24–48 hours, stirred occasionally before fermentation. The concentration of aszú was traditionally defined by the number of puttony (buckets) of dough added to a cask of must. Nowadays the puttony number is based on the content of sugar in the mature wine. Aszú ranges from 1 puttonyos to 6 puttonyos, with a further category called Aszú-Eszencia representing wines above 6 puttonyos.

Entry level sweet Tokaji is called Szamorodni ("the way it was grown") in which the grapes have a mixture of 'clean' and botrytised grapes, see the label of Tokaji Szamorodni from arguably the best of the Tokaji producers Szepsy (**Exhibit 18**).

Exhibit 18

Szepsy

Source: Company images

However, the high end Aszú has had six barrels of botrytis grape must (**Exhibit 19**).

Exhibit 19
Szepsy



Source: Company images

The apogée of Tokaji is Eszencia which is made from the juice of aszú berries which runs off naturally from the vats in which they are collected during harvesting. It cannot technically even be called a wine because the concentration of sugar means that its alcohol level never rises above 5-6% ABV. It is traditionally added to aszú wines, but may be allowed to ferment (a process that takes at least 4 years to complete) and then bottled pure.

Elsewhere in Europe, some very good value for money botrytis wines are made across the border in Austria. Here the biggest area is in Burgenland on the shores of the very large shallow lake of Neusiedlersee, where once again mists from the water promote the development of *botrytis cinerea*. As in Germany, the best botrytis wines are labelled TBA *trockenbeerenauslese*. What is unique about this region is the grapes used, often what are viewed as workhorse grapes elsewhere (Scheurebe and Welchriesling) and even Chardonnay. Although the grape mixture means that one never quite achieves the searing acidity of a Riesling TBA, in my view the wines are exceptionally good value for money. My personal favourite is the wines of Kracher (Exhibit 20), a very welcome detour if you are ever driving from Vienna to Budapest as I did this summer.

Exhibit 20
Kracher's TBA's



Source: Company images

Italy also makes small quantities of botrytis wine from noble rot grapes (*acini nobili* in Italian) from example from Maculan in Breganze (Exhibit 21).

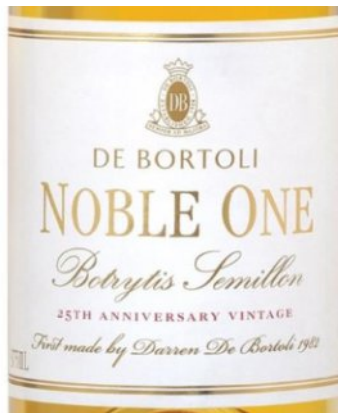
Exhibit 21
Maculan's Acininobili



Source: Company images

Outside Europe, Australia's De Bortoli make an exquisite Semillon-based botrytis wine Noble One (Exhibit 22).

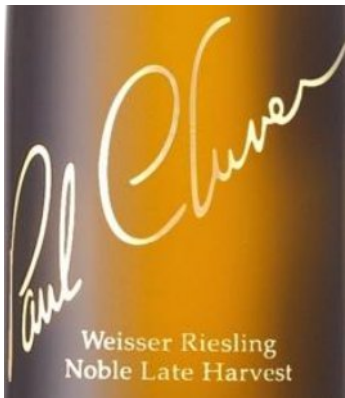
Exhibit 22
Australia's De Bortoli



Source: Company images

And South Africa is also a reliable source of good value botrytis wine, typically from Riesling or Chenin Blanc. For example Paul Cluver's Noble Late Harvest won Platter's White Wine of the Year in 2011) (**Exhibit 23**).

Exhibit 23
Paul Cluver's Noble Late Harvest



Source: Company images

Ice wines

Eiswein in Germany are wines produced from grapes frozen on the vine, and pressed while still frozen. Freezing concentrates not just the sugar in the grapes, but also acidity. Typically produced from Riesling, a frost of at least -8°C is needed, with grapes typically picked in November or December but even into January or February. Max Richter is a famous producer with a magnificent traditional label (**Exhibit 24**).

Exhibit 24
Eiswein from Richter



Source: Company images

Elsewhere in the world, Ice Wines are produced on Canada's Niagara peninsula. Inniskillin are the best known producer making wines from both noble grapes such as Riesling and from 'hybrid and Vidal (**Exhibit 25**).

Exhibit 25
Inniskillin Ice Wine

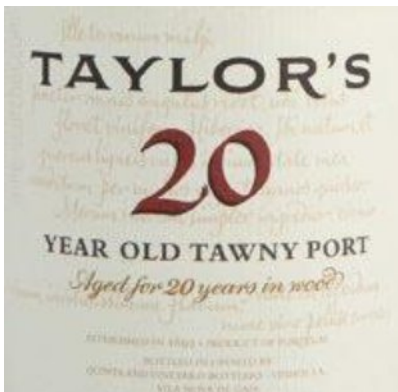


Source: Company images

Fortified dessert wines

The final technique to produce top-class sweet wines is fortification. In this technique, grape brandy is added to partially fermented wine, arresting the fermentation and preserving the residual sugar and acidity of the base wine. Port is the classic of this genre. Although we tend to think of red port drunk after a meal as a digestive, high quality tawny ports (aged in barrel rather than in bottle) make for superb dessert wines. A personal favourite is Taylor's 20 year old tawny port (**Exhibit 26**).

Exhibit 26
Taylor's 20 Year Old Tawny Port



Source: Company images

Madeira is also a source of high quality sweet fortified wine, especially the sweetest quality made from the Malvasia grape. Try Henriques and Henriques 15 years old Malvasia (**Exhibit 27**), awesome with your Christmas cake.

Exhibit 27
H&H Malvasia Madeira



Source: Company images

In Spain, there are wonderful sweet Oloroso sherries made from the Palomino grape. But try going off the beaten track and taste sherry made from the Pedro Ximénez grape (also known as PX). These wines have amazingly intense treacle favours. If you can find it, Ximénez-Spinola is a divine drop. And at a more affordable price point I thoroughly recommend Sainsbury's Taste the Difference Pedro Ximénez sherry drizzled over vanilla and honeycomb ice cream (**Exhibit 28**).

Exhibit 28
Pedro Ximenez Sherry from Ximenez-Spinola and Sainsbury's



Source: Company images

In France, fortified wines are known as *vins doux naturels* (VDN), translated as sweet natural wines. Although in my view there is nothing natural about the fortification process, VDN typically represent great value for money because they are so unfashionable. In the Southern Rhone and Languedoc, Muscat is often the base grape such as Muscat de Saint Jean de Minervois (**Exhibit 29**).

Exhibit 29
Muscat de St Jean de Minervois



Source: Company images

Banyuls is the appellation for France's most complex vins doux naturels – red dessert wines, yes red. These wines come from steep terraced vineyards above the Mediterranean at the southern limit of Roussillon right on the border. Grenache Noir must make up at least 50% of the blend, 75% for a Banyuls Grand Cru. Once again yields are very low and the grapes are often partly shrivelled before being picked in early October. The wines are aged in a very wide variety of containers: in glass demijohns or in barrels of all sizes, either carefully topped up in cool, damp conditions or deliberately

evaporating, sometimes outdoors to achieve rancid, oxidative flavours. Some are even aged in a local version of a solera system, similar the system used in sherry which blends vintages across the years.

Domaine du Mas Blanc (**Exhibit 30**) is considered by many to be Banyuls' leading estate. La Coume is a single vintage wine, mainly Grenache, with a little Mourvèdre, Carignan, Syrah and Grenache Gris. Banyuls Hors d'Age, is the product of a solera system.

Exhibit 30
Banyuls Domaine du Mas Blanc



Source: Company images

Maury is the other famous red vin doux naturel, which comes from hinterland Roussillon. Like Banyuls it is produced predominantly from Grenache Noir. The cooperative, Les Vignerons du Maury, dominates production; but there are two notable independent producers - Mas Amiel and Domaine de la Préceptorie. The non-vintage wines of Mas Amiel are made in a more oxidative style which gives a wine with more caramel flavours; whereas the single-vintage wines (**Exhibit 31**) are more fresh and fruit-driven, with a concentration of black fruits. Both are excellent.

Exhibit 31
Mas Amiel



Source: Company images

Finally Australia is also an unlikely source of top-notch fortified sweet wine from the Rutherglen in north east Victoria. As Jancis Robinson has written: "These wines really are some of the most extraordinary in the world, and nowhere else has the vine stocks and arid climate to grow and mature anything like them. Based on shrivelled red-skinned, small-berried Muscat and Muscadelle grapes, they can no longer be called respectively Liqueur Muscat and Liqueur Tokay. The EU didn't like the word 'liqueur' and the Hungarians were livid about the Australians' borrowing their word 'Tokay'." So the wines are now have the alternative names of Topaque and Apera. I don't think much of the new names but the wines are still amazing (**Exhibit 32**)

Exhibit 32
Morris Topaque



Source: Company images

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